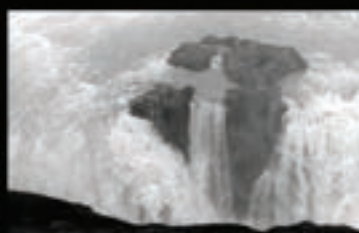


LWF Tenth Assembly • Winnipeg, Canada • 21–31 July 2003

Study Book

"For the Healing of the World"



The Lutheran World Federation

“For the Healing of the World” Assembly Study Book

**The Lutheran World Federation
Tenth Assembly
Winnipeg, Canada, 2003**

Parallel edition in German, French and Spanish:

Studienbuch zur Vollversammlung – „Zur Heilung der Welt”

Manuel d’Étude de l’Assemblée – « Pour guérir le monde »

Manual de Estudio para la Asamblea – “Para la sanación del mundo”

**It is essential that those attending the assembly
bring their copy of this book with them**

Concept, layout and cover design by LWF staff

Logo design by Erik Norbraten
and Richard Nostbakken, Canada.

Published by
The Lutheran World Federation
Office for Communication Services
P. O Box 2100
CH 1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland

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Printed on recycled paper by SRO-Kundig, Geneva
ISBN: 3-906706-95-8

Additional copies of this book are available
(at a cost) from

The Lutheran World Federation
Office for Communication Services
PO Box 2100
CH 1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland

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phone: ++41 22 791 6370

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“For the Healing of the World”

***Assembly Study
Book***

**The Lutheran World Federation
Tenth Assembly
Winnipeg, Canada, 2003**



Contents

PART 1: THE TENTH ASSEMBLY OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION 5

A. The Theme: “For the Healing of the World”	7
B. The Canadian Context Where We Meet	23
C. Preparing for the Assembly	29

PART II: DAILY EMPHASES AND BIBLE STUDIES 35

Day 1: For the Healing of the World	37
Genesis 2:4–10, 15	37
Revelation 22:1–5	41
Luke 7:18b–23	45
Day 2: O God, the Healer, Liberator, Savior of the World	49
Isaiah 42:1–12	49
Revelation 7:9–17	53
Day 3: Forgive and Heal.....	57
Genesis 50:15–21	57
Luke 7:36–50	61
Day 4: Reorder Power.....	65
Ruth 4:13–17	65
Luke 20:45–21:6	69
Day 5: Heal our Divisions.....	73
Ephesians 2:13–22	73
Luke 24:13–35	77
Day 6: Heal the Land... ..	81
Psalm 104:27–31	81
Romans 8:18–25	85

Day 7: Liberate from Bondage	89
Exodus 1:15–2:15	89
Luke 8:26–36	95
Micah 6:1–8	99
Day 8: Rectify Injustices... ..	99
Luke 1:46–55	103
Day 9: Empower Us to Act	107
Isaiah 61:1–4	107
Luke 13:10–17	113
Day 10: Fulfill Your Promises, O God	117
Isaiah 65:17–25	117
Revelation 21:1–6	121
 PART III: VILLAGE GROUPS	 125
A. God’s Healing Gift of Justification	127
B. God’s Healing Gift of Communion	139
C. Healing Divisions Within the One Church	149
D. The Mission of the Church in Multi-Faith Contexts	159
E. Removing Barriers that Exclude	171
F. The Church’s Ministry of Healing	181
G. Justice and Healing in Families	191
H. Overcoming Violence	203
I. Transforming Economic Globalization	215
J. Healing Creation	229

Part 1: The Tenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation



A. The Theme: “For the Healing of the World”

Why does the Lutheran communion of churches gather in Assembly?

Why should we gather from around the world to meet together in an Assembly? There are reasons prescribed in the LWF Constitution, such as electing officers and members of the Council and acting on reports. The business we will be about at the Assembly will be important for determining the future leadership and direction of our work as the LWF. But beyond these required constitutional matters are some deeply theological reasons for why we assemble together.

The church (*ecclesia*)—as the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit—is by nature an “assembly.” The Assembly of the LWF enables churches to worship, witness, confer and speak together on matters common to the whole church, and to express their unity as part of the one, universal, new community in Christ.

The LWF understands itself today as being more than a loosely affiliated federation of churches: we are a *communion* of Lutheran churches united through Word and sacrament. This holds us together in a more profound way than any constitutional requirements. Whenever and wherever we gather in local congregations to hear the Word and celebrate the sacraments, we are reminded that we do so as part of the worldwide communion of saints. The Word and sacraments bear witness to the triune God’s self-communication to us, creating communion with God and with one another.¹

This wider communion must become for us more than an abstract, faceless re-

ality. We must be able to touch, hear, taste and experience this reality first hand. In self-giving love, God became incarnate in a human being. Similarly, the communion we share with one another must become incarnate in very human, face-to-face kinds of communication and interaction that enrich, test and deepen what it truly means to be a communion.

Although there are many ways in which we can communicate today, they all fall short of the importance of gathering with one another, at the same time, in the same place, as flesh and blood creatures. As we are present with one another, we realize who our sisters and brothers in Christ actually are, and our generalizations are challenged. In living and working with one another over several days, we realize our significantly different situations and perceptions, as well as what we have in common. Through God’s grace, we begin to share our pains and joys, our burdens and gifts, and in that process, to gain a deeper sense of what occurs through the Holy Communion:

...through the interchange of Christ’s blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common... In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community of love.²

Here we receive the promise, a foretaste of God’s communion with the whole of creation in the coming reign of God. This coming together in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has important, ongoing consequences for our life together as churches throughout the world.

God's self-giving which constitutes communion with God in faith, seeks expression in forms of mutual sharing in both its spiritual and material aspects.³

This triune God also sends us out for the sake of God's mission in the world. Attending to what that mission means "for the healing of the world" is a central reason why member churches of the LWF will be assembling at Winnipeg. Held together by the power of God's Spirit, we are able to speak honestly about the challenges we face, and to discern, debate and decide how these will be addressed through our ongoing work as a communion.

How will we bear faithful witness in word and deed "for the healing of the world"? How will we address the tensions and problems we face within our churches and societies? How can this Lutheran communion of churches, as part of the wider church, further God's all-encompassing mission in and for the sake of the world?

The LWF Council has specified these purposes specific to the Tenth Assembly:

- Explore ways to be God's instruments for healing, justice and reconciliation in the midst of brokenness in church and society.
- Deepen the understanding and experience of the Lutheran communion by addressing differences and disparities among us and by sharing our gifts.
- Commit to closer and deeper cooperation within the ecumenical movement and to life in communion as given in Christ.
- Discern the challenges posed to Lutheran churches in today's multicultural and multi-faith contexts.

- Address spiritual, social and environmental challenges provoked especially by economic globalization.

A theme in continuity with previous assemblies

Although "healing" may not appear in the themes of other assemblies, the need for healing was implicit in many of them.⁴ At the First Assembly in 1947, meeting in Lund, Sweden under the theme, "**The Lutheran Church in the World Today**," member churches were determined to forgive and move beyond their images of those who had been enemies. They committed themselves to live and work together as a federation for healing in the world, especially on behalf of those who cried out, "we are bleeding." In the face of competing loyalties, the LWF sought to develop and maintain a clear confessional integrity and to translate this into meeting the post-World War II needs, especially in Europe.

The Second Assembly met in 1952 in Hanover, Germany, a city ravaged by war and overshadowed by the East/West split. Meeting under the theme, "**The Living Word in a Responsible Church**," a responsible engagement with society was emphasized in order to rectify previous Lutheran quietism on political questions. A department of theology was established, along with departments focused on world service and on mission, underlining the importance of common work in these areas. Although still mostly European and North American, other parts of the world began to be represented in their own right, along with the first laity to serve on the Executive Committee.

The only previous Assembly to meet in North America was the Third Assembly (1957) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Churches gathered under the theme,

“Christ Frees and Unites,” at a time when many Lutheran churches were experiencing repression under Communism and, especially in Africa, were struggling to overcome colonialism. In the United States, churches were growing, and the civil rights movement was beginning. Implicit in these contextual realities was the need for healing of the past. Confessional theological work was given significant attention, along with the public witness of Lutheran churches in the world. Various theses were adopted and passed on to member churches.

More church representatives from countries of the South were present when the Fourth Assembly met in 1963 in Helsinki, Finland, under the theme **“Christ Today.”** In view of the new dawning of ecumenism with Vatican II, an LWF Foundation for Interconfessional Research was established. The major focus at this Assembly was the doctrine of justification, but agreement on its contemporary meaning could not be reached.

Faced with controversy over the decision not to go to Brazil in 1970 because of the political situation there, the Fifth Assembly met instead in Evian, France, under the theme, **“Sent into the World.”** Once again, “the world” figured prominently in this theme, along with the conviction that the church cannot remain separate from a world of conflictual politics. Although some concern was expressed that in addressing socio-ethical issues the theological accent might become obscured, strong stances were taken on human rights and other social issues for the sake of the healing of the world into which the church is sent. New commitments were made to include more fully churches of the South as well as women and youth in decision making.

In 1977 the Sixth Assembly met for the first time in the South, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, under the theme, **“In Christ—A New Community.”** By now, 40 percent of the delegates were from churches of the



South, and 25 percent were women. The bold, historic decision was made to declare that a *status confessionis* situation existed when, under the South African apartheid system, a church excluded from membership on the basis of race. Root causes of injustice were given attention, in quest of healing in society and “reconciled diversity,” for the sake of healing divisions in the church.

Meeting for the first time in a Communist-ruled country, in Budapest, Hungary under the theme, **“In Christ—Hope for the World,”** the Seventh Assembly in 1984 took the subsequent solemn action of suspending from the LWF two white South African churches. It also sought to heal the painful legacy of the relationship between Lutheran churches and the Jewish people, the legacy of excluding women from being full partners in the church, and continued the concern for healing divisions in the church through ecumenical pursuits.

The 1990 Eighth Assembly in Curitiba, Brazil, shifted to a theme that resembles the 2003 theme. Under the Exodus-based theme, **“I Have Heard the Cry of My People,”** the Assembly focused on situations of political and economic oppression around the world, and called for ac-

tion in solidarity with people and the rest of creation in their suffering. Considerable attention was also given to the emerging *communio* nature of the LWF, and to the extensive re-structuring intended to express that more clearly.

Finally, meeting for the first time in Asia, the 1997 Ninth Assembly returned to another christological theme, “**In Christ—Called to Witness.**” Meeting in Hong Kong immediately after its return to the jurisdiction of China, as well as meeting in a context where Christians, much less Lutherans, are in a distinct minority, was noteworthy.

It is apparent that the theme of the Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg is in continuity with and builds upon the themes of previous assemblies:

- Attention to the world, whether explicit or implicit, has been there from the beginning. The world’s problems, divisions and tensions have deeply affected what it means for the church to gather in assembly at a given time and place. Although the church’s agenda must never be reduced to the world’s agenda, it cannot ignore the challenges to faith and discipleship emerging from the world. The faith we confess is more than private; it has public implications for the sake of the world.

How might this theme catch the attention of people living in a skeptical, pluralistic world? When Lutherans from throughout the world assemble in Winnipeg, what will be the public witness they will bring to Canada?

- The idea of “healing” has been implicit in many of the emphases and actions of previous assemblies. Healing is central to the calling of the church: proclaiming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ; bridging social, political

and economic differences; understanding the significance of justification in the lives of believers in the world; working for justice, human rights, peace and reconciliation; rectifying policies of exclusion; working to heal divisions in the church and with people of other faiths. In countless ways member churches are quietly bringing healing in communities throughout the world.

- In many previous Assembly themes, Christ was clearly proclaimed as the one who brings about what the world seeks. The 2003 Assembly theme causes those who hear it to pause and to ask, Who or what is “for the healing of the world”? Rather than immediately responding with “Christ” as the answer, we are invited to reflect more deeply on how God, who creates, redeems and sustains us and all of creation, is indeed “for the healing of the world.” In addition to the central role of Christ, what are the important but often overlooked roles of the Creator and the Spirit?

A theme consistent with what Lutheran churches have been about

Healing is an emphasis that has shaped the LWF. International diaconal work, especially reaching out to refugees from World War II, was key in its founding. Although initially focused on serving the needs of Lutherans, “healing” in its broad sense was at stake: providing emergency assistance; helping displaced people to find and settle into homes in new lands; healing physical and emotional wounds of war; and seeking recon-

ciliation with those living behind the Iron Curtain. Over the years, this work began to shift, especially to areas such as the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Institutions have been established to provide vitally needed health services and education. This international diaconal work, as it occurs today through the Department for World Service, has long been at the heart of the recognized identity of the LWF, especially in places where Lutherans are otherwise scarce. This work continues to be pivotal in the LWF today, making it distinctive as an international church organization.

Over the years, there has been increasing awareness that in addition to providing these services, the root causes of poverty, violence and other injustices need to be examined and addressed, not only by large international organizations, but also by the churches themselves. Diaconia needs to be understood and practiced in relation to wider systemic factors. Prior to the Assembly a global LWF consultation is being held in South Africa under the theme, “Prophetic Diaconia: For the Healing of the World,” with poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence being the examples that challenge and expand what diaconia needs to be about in our day. Results from that consultation are expected to feed into the Assembly.

From 1997-2000, the LWF was engaged in an empirical theological study of how Lutheran churches understand and live out what it means to be a communion in society. One of the observations coming out of that study is how central diaconal work (or “social ministry”) has become in the recognized profile of member churches.⁵ In fact, we might ask whether this, along with the Word and sacraments, is actually becoming for Lutherans one of the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*).

Word and sacraments are, of course, the way in which the Lutheran Confessions have long identified what is essen-

tial to the church. The healing power of the proclaimed Word, especially in terms of law and gospel, certainly has been a hallmark of Lutheranism. Just as crucial, but perhaps under-emphasized in many Lutheran churches, has been the healing power of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, along with corporate prayer and the confession and forgiveness of sin. Pastoral care has been and continues to be a strong emphasis in most Lutheran churches. In these and other ways, healing is what churches have long been about: receiving into communion, consoling, guiding, rebuking, announcing and embodying God’s forgiveness.

The Assembly theme embraces these recognizable dimensions of the church, which will be emphasized especially in the worship life of the Assembly. The theme is grounded in these understandings of healing, while moving us outward, to the healing of the world.

A world desperately in need of healing

As the theme draws our attention to the world, we are reminded that:

- The world as God’s creation is bestowed by God with being and worth. God became incarnate in this world. It is not dualistically separated from a spiritual realm of life, but is where we see and participate in the drama of God’s activity throughout the whole inhabited earth (*oikos*).
- The world is also a fallen world, where sin and brokenness are all too evident in human distortions and betrayals of what God has given and intends, in injustices that deny the dignity of all, and in

violence that destroys life itself. A world permeated by sin and brokenness is desperately in need of healing.

- As people of faith we ourselves are in need of healing. We are also called to participate in the healing or transformation of the world, through small acts of service—faith active in love—as well as wider practices to change policies and practices that wound and harm what God has created and sustains. We are among God's healing, diaconal agents.

As Lutherans prepare to gather in 2003 in Winnipeg, what specific prayers, words and actions will we bring for this wounded, frightening world in which we live?

- We participate in this healing with the awareness that ultimately it is not our efforts that heal the world, but that God promises a new creation, salvation of the whole earth and cosmos. The fulfillment of this hope is in God's hands and time, not in ours, yet it is this eschatological hope that inspires and sustains our efforts.

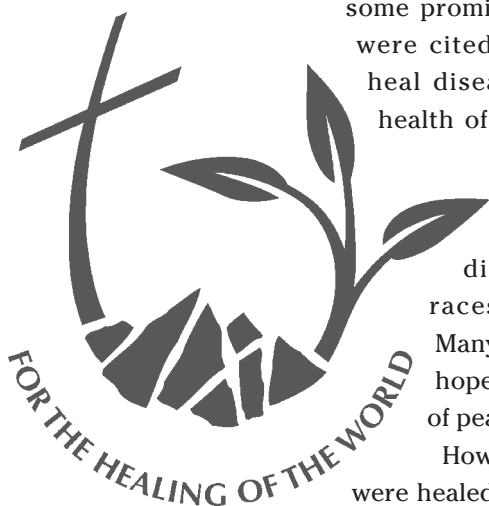
As the past millennium came to an end, some promising signs of healing were cited, such as efforts to heal disease, to improve the health of communities, to liberate those who have been oppressed, to reconcile those of different ideologies, races and nationalities. Many looked forward with hope to a new millennium of peace.

However, as old divisions were healed, new ones arose. Sin

and its effects continued to be manifest in familiar as well as in alarmingly new ways. Old and new rivalries broke open, confounding the illusion that old wounds had actually been healed. Those left ever further behind by the forces of globalization became more ravaged, wounded and devastated, while others reached dizzying heights of affluence. The former sometimes sought refuge in expressions of fundamentalism, while the latter celebrated what now is possible through global flows of postmodern culture, technology and capital. Some feared a violent "clash of civilizations." The ecumenical spirit of openness to others has given way to sharp new forms of religious balkanization in many places throughout the world.

The hope for global human progress toward healing, justice and peace continues to be severely tested. The earth itself ruptures through quakes or other natural catastrophes, and thousands of already impoverished people suddenly find themselves without homes. For the sake of economic or political gain, desperate rulers exercise despotic power over their citizens, whose lives become expendable. Under the policies of the international financial institutions, a country's economy can plunge into chaos, shattering the livelihood and future of its people. In flashes of unimaginable destruction, human power and possibilities can suddenly be thrown into a state of crisis. Peace and relative well-being can disappear in a massive cloud of human debris. Such vulnerability and devastation have been recurring throughout much of the world.

In North America, well-known symbols of human know-how, achievement and strength were pierced and destroyed by speeding airplanes that suddenly became weapons of mass destruction, as they crashed into fortresses of human might and security. This became a potent mixture of technological triumph, financial strength, military might,



resentment, anger, hatred, mourning and fear. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of this fiery inferno were filled with human beings from around the world, and rendered through a child's drawing into a burning cross.

From the perspective of the cross

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Assembly logo of the cross bending toward the broken earth is a dramatic reminder of the potential of the Christian faith to speak to these critical times in which we live and to bring healing (the leaves).

In encountering personal trauma or global crises, we become more aware of the human capacity for evil, as well as of our capacity to do good by serving the neighbor, reaching out with compassionate mercy and justice across human divides. Human beings are both destroyers and healers. Luther reminds us that Christians are simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). According to St. Paul, there are no hard and fast distinctions between those who are good and those who are evil; “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The cross shatters the illusion that dominating power is what matters—that human beings can save, secure, or make life invulnerable, in other words, that human beings have divine power. Seeking to become like God is itself the essence of sin. Human attempts to root out all evil, to establish total security, to hunt down and conquer the enemy in any clear-cut or final way are continually confounded. Such attempts are especially troubling when religion is misused as a tool to mobilize forces of resistance and violence for the sake of what is seen as “God’s will.”

Seeking divine legitimization of human power must be challenged. In most



societies, such human power has been held by and associated with men more than women. When God then is portrayed and addressed in exclusively male terms, this tends to provide divine legitimization for patriarchal patterns of power in society. A theology of the cross suggests much different understandings and dynamics of power, and concepts of God who is beyond gender. We are challenged to live this out more consistently in our ecclesial language and practices.

How have people in your church viewed events of massive destruction? What have you said, or wanted to say, to those directly affected, especially to others in the communion?



A theology of the cross is a decisive counter to the seductive appeal of a theology of glory. As Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has repeatedly pointed out, such a theological emphasis is especially needed in contexts such as North America, where the Assembly will meet:

For us as a people, expectancy is synonymous with progress, expansion, development, production, growth, bigness, victory, the breaking of barriers, the pushing back of frontiers, the refusal to admit limits, the sense of power and success. We have even banished death ... and the religion of Jesus helped us do it.⁶

The Assembly will meet in a country that lies in the shadow of the most powerful country in the world today. This “empire” pervasively affects, for good and ill, the rest of the globe. A theology of the cross brings critical perspectives to this kind of reality, by focusing our attention instead on the lowliness and suffering that is the plight of so much of the rest of the world, including there where many LWF member churches minister.

Luther reminded us that tendencies toward theological triumphalism are re-

flected in preferring glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, good to evil.⁷ As human beings, we often seek to justify ourselves through our actions, rather than relying on God’s grace as we know it through Jesus Christ. To begin with the indicative—with how *God* justifies, liberates, reconciles, heals—provides a much different basis for human action. We act in light of what God has done and promises to bring to fulfillment, rather than seeking recognition for what our efforts will bring about, as if *we* will heal the world.

We may yearn for definitive solutions to sin and evil, but we are left with partial glimpses of what God promises. Yet, we trust in those promises. Out of these depths, the human cries out for help to the God who cannot be seen. We may begin to glimpse some signs of healing, but often in ways we do not expect or cannot verify according to human criteria. A theology of the cross reminds us that God’s healing power is active in human history, not through the kind of triumphal might that many associate with “God,” but through weakness, vulnerability and suffering. God’s power is made known through the cross. Living from that

power, the church is called to be with those who are being stripped of life by sickness, disease and conflict, to be with those who are poor, marginalized and violated, to identify with the shamed and outcast, and to live among those who are fearful and terrorized.

Those of us for whom vulnerability and desperation are ongoing rather than new realities can testify to how such a suffering, compassionate God does indeed bring healing, new life and liberating hope. In the depths of human pathos, we experience God's abiding commitment to the world—God with us—giving us the courage to enter the darkness, with all the wounds, scars and diseases in need of healing. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we do so in communion with one another, and in the confident hope that God's promises will be fulfilled.

This is what it means to be the church. And yet, churches are too often caught up in fear, suspicion of "the other," and "business as usual." Too often churches are captive to the protection of economic, political, or social privilege. Unless churches themselves are "converted" from such predominant tendencies, they cannot presume to be "for the healing of the world." Through the transformative power of the cross, the church's eyes are opened to the painful realities in the world that it has previously overlooked, its ears begin to hear the cries rising from the suffering earth, and its heart is moved to act compassionately with others.

What needs to be healed?

The theme immediately reminds us of particular persons who are in need of healing—we ourselves, and those close to us—especially those who are regularly named in intercessory prayers of

the church. This has been the focus of much of the church's healing ministry.

Health and health care are major concerns throughout the world, especially in those places where there is an alarming lack of accessible, affordable health care—including in affluent countries such as the United States. Historically the church has taken the initiative to provide such care there where it is most needed. Increasingly pivotal is its advocacy role for the sake of health care for all.

Justification is the basis from which we approach other needs for healing. People's deepest spiritual needs for healing have been addressed through the good news of God's gracious, justifying activity in Jesus Christ:

Justification is the forgiveness of sins (*cf.* Rom 3:23–25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12–21) and from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10–14). It is acceptance into communion with God—already now, but then fully in God's coming kingdom (Rom 5:1f). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5).⁸

What afflicts us includes diseases acquired that are primarily physical, as well as those that are more mental or spiritual. Jesus was clear that disease or illness is not the result of a sin that has been committed (Lk 13:1–5; Jn 9:2–3). What is reflective of sin are the ways those who are diseased, are separated, or alienated from the community (as lepers were in Jesus' day). Some diseases result in deep scars and disabilities that last a lifetime, and may never be cured.

Some "diseases" deeply afflict how we think, see, or act, such as when eco-

What in the world is in need of healing? What are the specific cries, pains, laments, memories? What are the diseases, illnesses and wounds from which the world and the church suffer?

conomic measures become all that matter. Entrenched poverty continues to haunt billions. Parts of the world suffer from excessive individualism and consumerism. We and the rest of creation become “polluted” and thus ill, because of the very air we breathe, both literally and figuratively. All these and more of the world’s diseases need to be raised up as a collective lament to God.

Healing is also needed because of the walls that are erected between people due to their ethnicity, race, caste, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, physical or mental condition. These barriers lead to further injustices. Out of our sickness (or sin), we erect walls that exclude or discriminate against others. Many of these have deep cultural bases, which is why they can be so difficult to talk about or to address, such as those related to ethnicity, caste, gender and sexuality. Many of the “walls” between churches are related to the huge economic disparities in the world, which in turn are reflected in the affluence of some member churches in stark contrast to the dire poverty of others. We need to reflect on how Christ breaks down the most entrenched walls or taboos, transforming our assumptions and ways of relating to one another.

Furthermore, others inflict wounds on us—various forms of violence and injustice, whether covert or overt, interpersonal or institutional. We are sinned against, and we sin against others. The scars and memories fester, and can lead to resentment if not violence. Some wounds are inflicted by those as close at hand as family members, as occurs in domestic violence, others by our governments or by more distant political and economic powers, especially under the reign of economic globalization. The seemingly intrac-

table conflicts raging in the world today, and the deep scars they inflict on all of creation, cry out for reconciliation that does far more than gloss over differences.

Churches have sometimes been among those who have legitimated or inflicted the wounds, and perpetuated illnesses in persons and societies. For example, people are blamed for their impoverished or diseased condition. Theology is used to endorse rather than critique the worst features of affluence. Bible passages are used to justify keeping women and others in their places. Christian theology is used to denounce other faiths. Churches aligned with certain ethnic groups or nations have inflicted massive suffering on others, especially on those who are different from themselves. The divisions within and among churches and the walls of animosity with those of other faiths must be addressed. Silence in the face of oppression and exploitation of people and lands, such as the indigenous peoples and land of North America, has resulted in untold deaths and devastation.

Might there be honest naming, confessing and critiquing of how we as churches have been complicit in what needs to be brought to light and healed? This is likely to occur through many aspects of the Assembly and the interaction that will occur there, especially in the work of the Village Groups. Here the different healing challenges in our world and churches will be addressed from the perspective of the Christian faith. From this work will emerge commitments and directions for future priorities and work of the Lutheran communion.

Theological perspectives on “healing”

The grounding for the Assembly theme goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures. In

From the perspective of your church, what kinds of healing are especially needed?

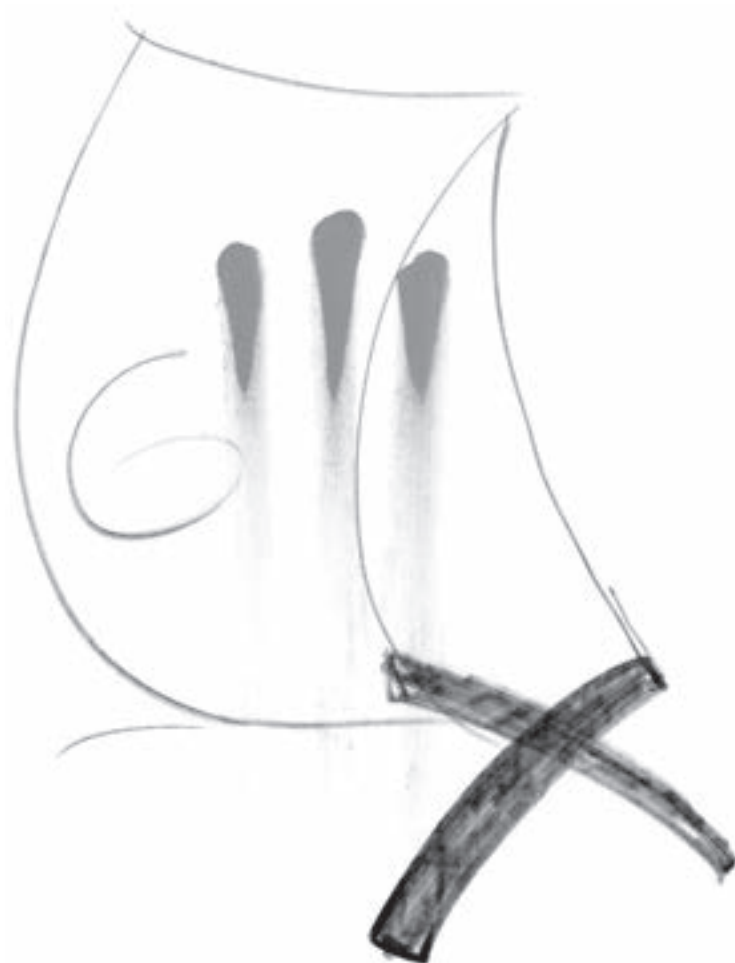
the presence of the righteous and compassionate Yahweh,

Israel experienced the forgiveness of sin and the healing that freed it for commitment to the order of life intended by God for all.⁹

Thus, the people of ancient Israel, and Jews since then have understood their calling to mend, heal and transform the world in light of God's creative and redemptive purposes in human history. Jesus and the Early Church were anchored in this understanding:

With Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus looked to the day when God would break the bonds of sin that enslaved humans, freeing them to be God's people. According to Jesus, that day was to be a day of healing not only for humans, but for all creation. ... Jesus anticipated God's drawing near to restore a broken and fallen creation, and God drawing those who were faithful to God's plan of healing and justice into participation in the Kingdom.¹⁰

Christians today believe that healing comes through faith in the God we know in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit heals us and all of creation. Healing is made possible by the power of God's Spirit, as an expression of God's love and grace. The Spirit is the power of God through which people are continually being rescued, healed and saved. Healing restores the right relationship with God, with other persons, peoples, communities and with the rest of creation. It has dimensions that are spiritual, physical, psychological and social, and in these ways, is "salvific."



Healing can be a way of understanding what forgiveness and reconciliation are about. Forgiveness points toward the healing of pain, liberation from oppression, rectifying injustices and mending of broken relationships, beginning with our relationship with God. Forgiveness is a process that includes both the perpetrator and the offended. Jesus not only forgave, but he identified with the victims, healing and freeing them, so

Rita lost her brother in the attack on the World Trade Center, because he chose to help others less able than himself to escape. In her grief over his death, she went to Afghanistan to get to know those who have experienced far greater loss due to the US bombing. They became closer to her than her own family. Now she has returned to the US to tell *their* story of loss. "What they have endured through 23 years of war," she remarks, "the last part of which was carried out in the name of my brother!"

that their dignity was restored. Genuine reconciliation is a mutual process; both are changed in the encounter. It cannot occur unless the injustices in the relationship are addressed. Reconciliation in turn paves the way for new relationships, for new ways of being together, for a new future that is not tied to the pains of the past. In political as well as personal life, forgiveness has to do with how we manage our relationships with the past without letting them manage us.

Healing can be a long and difficult process. It is not synonymous with curing; the wound or condition can persist. Disabling conditions may persist, but what can be transformed is how people are received as whole persons in community. Restoration to live faithfully in community is what healing seeks. Just as forgiveness does not necessarily mean forgetting, healing does not mean the disappearance of all signs of a disease or wound. Memories often cannot be healed, especially when they are deeply painful. The source of the pain or wound needs to be re-visited before healing can occur.

Healing points to all the ways through which people are liberated and reconciled in the world, and how the world itself is being healed or saved. While we affirm the signs of healing in our day, we “wait with eager longing” (Rom 8:19ff.) for God’s promised healing or redemption of all creation in the age to come. As one Asian Lutheran theologian has put it,

For Luther, the Spirit of justification is the Spirit of creation, and the Spirit of resurrection and a final transformation of all things, a new heaven and earth.¹¹

Jesus, heal us!

Healing is a pervasive theme in the ministry of Jesus. In approaching this theme, some Western understandings of healing and health care may need to be tempo-

rarily suspended in order to appreciate the much different cultural assumptions operating in the New Testament stories of Jesus and healing. In this sense, this theme provides rich opportunities for cross-cultural considerations that privilege other healing perspectives, which continue to be present in many parts of the Lutheran communion today, but are often overlooked or viewed with skepticism.

As a condition of well-being, health is understood according to what is valued within a given cultural system. It involves more than bodily or physical health. Illness is experienced through aspects of a culture such as honor and shame and the misfortune brought by spirits. Healing focuses not on disease or curing, but on the personal and social meaning of the sickness.¹² In healing, the meaning of such experiences is transformed.

This is apparent in the worldview of Luke’s Gospel, which was strongly influenced by spirits and demons. Here Jesus is portrayed as conceived, baptized and sent forth in ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. In that sense, he is a Spirit-filled prophet who healed people of illnesses associated with unclean spirits. His focus was not on the causes or diagnoses of sickness, but on restoring persons to wholeness or integrity. “The miracles were nothing less than the mending of the created order.”¹³

To be healed was more than a private experience; it involved the wider social, economic and political orders of relationships. Social power was re-ordered through healing, which was why this was seen as threatening to the established order. Jesus reached out to touch others, or was touched himself, across taboo boundaries of impurity. He drove out demons whose possession made persons powerless to act. Although Jesus did not have significant social power or status, he is depicted as a folk healer, one who took people’s needs for healing at face value. He entered individual stories and

experiences of suffering, bringing concrete experiences of liberation.

The body matters

The theme evokes the bodily as well as spiritual dimensions of life. It compels us to re-examine how we view and relate to our bodies, the bodies of those different from us, and the whole body of creation — as God's good creation. God creates us as embodied flesh and blood beings; our bodies truly do matter in God's scheme of things. Bodies are very central in Jesus' healing ministry, and in the Christian hope, "the resurrection of the body." Furthermore, the church has often been referred to as a body: "now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27).

I believe that God has created me, together with all creatures. (Martin Luther)

Martin Luther viewed all of creation as the abode of God's indwelling, and refused to sever the spiritual from the material. Thus,

we are to rejoice in our bodiliness as the very place the utterly incarnate God is with us, not sever our souls from the biophysical in an attempt to leave earth behind and incant our way to supposedly "higher" places.¹⁴

The problem is that some aspects of the Christian tradition, including some New Testament passages, reflect the influence of Greek dualistic thought, in which the physical body was seen as separate from and inferior to the spirit or soul. This was epitomized in the heresy of Gnosticism. These influences resulted in a devaluing of bodies. Further devalued were those whose bodies are different from the norm, such as women or people with deformities or disabilities, whose inferiority has been justified on the basis of their bodies. Despite the Christian doctrines of

Are there negative messages regarding the body that have you received through the church? How, if at all, has your culture or family communicated a different message?

creation, incarnation and resurrection of the body, this devaluation of the body has adversely affected how we view bodies, sexuality, disabilities, illness, the rest of creation and the overall theme of "healing." Even though the church was referred to as the body of Christ, this tended to be spiritualized.

We do not **have** bodies, as if they were inferior servants who work for us, but instead we **are** bodies, made up of the same stuff as other life forms on our planet.¹⁵ The body is how each one of us can be recognized, responded to, touched, cared for, loved, as well as oppressed, beaten, starved and killed. We experience the greatest pleasure and the most intense pain in our bodies, which knit us together in networks of shared suffering and joy with all of creation. Through bodies—in all their diversity—we are connected with one another, with the rest of creation and with God. Disdain and fear of bodies begins to be overcome. We become one body with the rest of creation. Taking the needs of the body seriously points toward a new inclusive sense of justice for all of creation.

Healing through the sacraments

We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body is helped as well.¹⁶

The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion are means of grace, expres-

sions of the saving and healing presence of God in the church. They are healing events through which God restores human beings. The Church Fathers called the Eucharist a medicine of immortality; it provides us not only with a remedy on earth but also with eternal life. Luther viewed the Eucharist as daily food and sustenance; it is given to us so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened, so that we will not succumb in the struggle with sin, but grow stronger. Other rites of healing are, in a sense, extensions of the Eucharist.

How can the sacraments help us to understand the nature of healing as God's gift? To be realistic, patient and not to make empty promises to those in need of healing?

The sacraments are gifts of God. God bestows them freely. They cannot be manipulated to cure illnesses. Thus, they help us to challenge healing practices based on superstitions. Dualisms that separate body or matter from spirit or soul are challenged by sacramental approaches to healing and wholeness, which consider a human being as a unity of body, mind and spirit.

Holy Communion is the source of and creative force behind what it means for us to be a communion. It expresses both the particularity and catholicity of the church. We meet the resurrected Christ in the breaking of bread (Lk 24:13–35), and are formed into a meal-sharing community. By receiving communion we take Christ into our bodies, in a way that transforms us personally and collectively. The people gather, the Word of God is proclaimed, the people intercede for the needs of the church and the world, the eucharistic meal is shared, and the people are sent out into the world with a mission.

How can the unity of sacramental celebration and daily life be strengthened?

As God in Christ has entered into the human situation, so there is an intrinsic connection between the sacraments and daily life. The sacraments express the corporeality and materiality of the faith. Through them, God's grace becomes visible, edible, drinkable and audible. The sacraments are celebrated in the midst of the suffering world that yearns for healing. It is significant that the Lutheran communion, meeting under the theme, "for the healing of the world," will celebrate Holy Communion each day.

The spirit of the triune God

The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of talking about the mystery of God who saves and heals through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ The point of this doctrine is to express that God goes forth into the world as breath. That breath communicates and gives life to the Word. The Word calls forth a living faith, as well as disclosing the purposes of God everywhere in the world.¹⁸ The Trinity is a way of speaking of God that expresses God's profound involvement in, with and for the world.¹⁹ God communicates to the world a plentitude of overflowing love, grace and mercy.

Much of the renewed attention to trinitarian theology in our day has underlined the relational, dialogical nature of God, in ways that draw upon and yet go beyond some Eastern (Orthodox) understandings. Rather than as an autonomous patriarch, God is essentially relational, as are we and the whole universe. Different notions of divine power become evident, as relational, *communio*-creating power. Everything comes from and returns to God, through Christ and in the Spirit. Christ is the communion of the divine and human, and the Holy Spirit unites all persons in communion with God and one another.

The truth about God and ourselves is that we were meant to live as persons in community, living from God, for and with others. From an African perspective, we **are** in relation to others.

Entering into the life of God means entering in the deepest way possible ... into the life of Jesus Christ, the life of the Spirit, the life of others. ... into a life of love and communion with others.²⁰

Saving and healing love is at the heart of this reign of God. God in Christ inaugurates this by forgiving sin, casting out demons and healing. God's reign or communion is the shared rule of equal persons in communion, not domination of some over others.

A triune understanding of God becomes the basis for mutuality among persons, different groups of people and among churches from different parts of the world. Rather than some being viewed as normative and set over others, a communion grounded in the triune God is characterized by equality, mutuality and reciprocity in the midst of our very real differences.

Within such a triune understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world, the role of the Spirit acquires new significance. In the New Testament healing stories, especially in Luke and Acts, the power of the Holy Spirit is repeatedly emphasized. Throughout church history, there has been a close association between the Holy Spirit and healing.

The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith.²¹

Through the Spirit, we participate in the divine pathos, present in human history and throughout creation. We enter into communion with the crucified and risen Christ, in whom God's Spirit has

What are the implications of trinitarian theology for how we relate to each other within this communion? For how we relate to those of other faiths?

been made visible and tangible. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the presence and reality of God's creating, saving, preserving work in ways that can be sensed and experienced. Luther's conviction was that the presence of the indwelling Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom and power. To "receive the Holy Spirit" is to see what God is doing in and through the brokenness of our lives and world to bring healing, and to enliven people toward each other and the rest of creation.²²

The Holy Spirit affects how we experience God and participate in and with one another. We are set in a web of new relationships with one another, in ways that cut across and transform old boundaries. God's Spirit empowers us to act differently in relation to one another. Polarities and hostilities that can contribute to violence are overcome in favor of a community of solidarity, responsibility and love. Love reaches out and draws others in, creating diverse webs of relatedness.

The spirit of the modern world, with its emphasis on human power and know-how, is relativized by the power of God's Spirit. Finitude and vulnerability are accepted rather than something we seek to overcome. Instead of self-preservation, we are liberated from the need to assert ourselves at the expense of others. We are freed from the presumption that the world can be healed by principles of conquest that actually divide and destroy human community. People are freed in relationship to themselves and the ruling powers. This can be threatening to the powers that reign in our world today. It can become a powerful witness, as the Holy Spirit opens us up to the world.

How have you experienced this boundary-crossing love?

Deliberating, discerning and deciding together

Through the power of the Spirit we are able to assemble together. Furthermore, we are able to communicate and hear in ways we would not be able to on our own. The Holy Spirit precedes and underlies communication with one another. Rather than our differences hindering communion with one another, in our diversity we together become the body of Christ, bearers of and witnesses to God's presence in the world.

At Pentecost (Acts 2), with the outpouring of the Spirit, members of the Early Church were able to understand each other in unexpected ways. Similarly, we may not be able to understand one another's language or culture, but together we acquire a new comprehension of what it means to be a communion in the world. In this communion we may speak different languages and have different identities, yet we still have something in common. Amid what seem to be impossible hurdles to mutual understanding, amid all the foreignness, the

Spirit imparts a sense of connection and familiarity. People with different gifts and abilities can attest to the reality of a relational God who creates, delivers and gives life to us and the whole world. God's presence is experienced in concretely diverse ways, arising out of different cultural situations that are mutually challenging and enriching testimonies to what God is about.

Through the power of the Spirit we are able to communicate across our many differences, to deliberate what is at stake in light of Scripture and our faith convictions, and to discern what we as a communion will do. The Spirit restores solidarity and the ability to act, to resist in the face of despair, to move beyond feelings of insecurity, fear and paralysis. Dominant values and systems cannot limit the action of the Spirit, who rules through what seems like powerlessness. We "blaspheme against the Holy Spirit" when we disregard how God's Spirit is delivering us out of conditions from which there seems no human escape.²³ Forgiveness of sin raises up those who are crushed. We experience a new beginning in which relationships are restored. Solidarity implies accountability to one another. We become more vulnerable, capable of being changed by the suffering, open to critique and to change reality. As we become open with and for each other, we are changed for others so as to work for that which is good for the neighbor...and for the healing of the world.

How might this Assembly be like a Pentecost experience for those who gather?

B. The Canadian Context

Where We Meet

The Tenth Assembly will gather in the city of Winnipeg, a city of 635,000 people in the center of the world's second largest country in geographical terms. Canada has been blessed with abundant natural resources, strong traditions of Aboriginal, French and English peoples, and a rich diversity of immigrants who continue to weave the fabric of Canadian society. The *1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* observes that

Canada is a test case for a great notion—the notion that dissimilar peoples can share lands, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences. The story of Canada is the story of many such peoples, trying and failing and trying again, to live together in peace and harmony.

Canadian society and government

In a country of two confederating cultures in 1867, successive waves of immigrants (primarily from all parts of Europe and more recently from Asia) have produced a multicultural population. With Francophones comprising 25 percent of the population, aspirations within the province of Québec to be *maîtres chez nous* have grown to include significant desires for sovereignty from



“the rest of Canada.” While French culture contributes significantly to Canadian culture and identity, growing multicultural diversity seems to be eroding sensitivities to these aspirations.

At the same time, Canada's history of federalism and its vast geography have shaped a society embodying a strong cooperative social consciousness that has stood against crude individualistic and unfettered capitalist approaches. This has created a sense of “responsibility for the whole,” and the development of a highly valued “social safety net.” This now is under threat as Canada is increasingly shaped by globalizing forces and its powerful southern neighbor. The Canadian churches have been reminded that they cannot have an effective private mo-

Canada's name derives from the Huron-Iroquois word for “village” or “settlement,” referring in 1535 to the early settlement of Quebec City. Winnipeg's name means “muddy waters” in the Cree language, describing its location and the effects where the waters of the Red River and the Assiniboine River come together. Where the rivers meet in downtown Winnipeg, “The Forks” marks what has been an important meeting place for more than 6,000 years. Thus, meeting in Village Groups and gathering at The Forks will take on special meaning at the Assembly.

Assimilation policies have done great damage, leaving a legacy of brokenness affecting Aboriginal individuals, families and communities. The damage has been equally serious for the spirit of Canada – the spirit of generosity and mutual accommodation in which Canadians take pride. Aboriginal reality in Canada has become a vicious circle of cause and effect. If that vicious circle is to become a healing circle, the roots of injustice must be addressed. Breaking free of the pain, anger and resentment that are the legacy of the colonial past means allowing Aboriginal people and communities to initiate their healing strategies – initiatives that draw on traditional practices and an understanding of people's needs. (*The 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*)

rality without a lively social ethic and vision for the whole, which they must imaginatively preserve and enhance.²⁴

Canada is a parliamentary democracy and a respected nation with moderate influence on the world stage. This includes membership in the G8, the Commonwealth and the Francophonie; longstanding support of United Nations peacekeeping; and, a willingness sometimes to distinguish itself sharply from US policies (e.g., Vietnam, Cuba and missile defense). More recently, Canada and its churches have been strong advocates for debt relief for poorer nations and for the abolition of landmines.

Yet, there are great tensions in Canadian society which are in urgent need of healing. These concern French-English relations, regional differences and rivalries, relations with Aboriginal peoples, and debates about social policy and “public versus private” responsibilities (for example, health care, education and income security).

Relations with Aboriginal peoples

Canadian life includes a troubled history of relations between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, beginning with colonial traders and settlers who either befriended or betrayed the resident Aboriginal peoples as they chose. Health care, education, employment and social services are critical issues for Ab-

original people, along with issues of land claims and self-government. The establishment in 1999 of the new Territory of Nunavut (meaning “our land”) provided the first embodiment of Aboriginal self-government on the national scene.

Although Canada is among the top countries in which to live (according to the annual UN Human Development Index), the well-being of many of Canada's Aboriginal communities has been below that of many developing nations. Aboriginal people face a life expectancy six years shorter than the Canadian average. Aboriginal youth suicide rates are five to eight times greater than the national average. The Aboriginal infant mortality rate is almost double the Canadian average, and 40 percent of Aboriginal people live at or below the poverty line.²⁵

Since 1975, a coalition of Canadian churches has been working in partnership with Aboriginal people and community organizations in the *Aboriginal Rights Coalition*. With a focus on public education and action programs, this coalition seeks to build alliances and solidarity in the struggle for Aboriginal justice in Canada, and seeks reconciliation between Aboriginal peoples, the Christian community and Canadian society.

Immigration

Most of Canada's population of 31 million people (in 2001) live within a 300 km west-

to-east band stretching for a distance comparable to that of England to the Persian Gulf. Immigration to present-day Canada began in the sixteenth century with explorers, fur traders and settlers from France and Great Britain. The American Revolution in the late eighteenth century drove many “empire loyalists” north into Canada. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, great waves of immigrants came from Europe in search of land for farming and freedom for religious and social expression. Canada’s vast expanses attracted many to move north. German immigrants settled mainly in southern Ontario with smaller numbers in the west. Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Finns and Icelanders settled in great numbers in northern Ontario and the western provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Where they settled, they also established churches.

Immigration patterns have changed dramatically in the last 50 years, decreasing from more than 90 percent European before 1961 to about 19 percent since 1991, and from only 3 percent Asian before 1961 to 57 percent since 1991. Canada continues to emphasize its multicultural character as a mosaic rather than a melting pot. Some critics say this detracts from a sense of social cohesion.

Theologian Douglas John Hall reframes this issue in terms of “hospitality.”

Hospitality is an important biblical concept which means more than inclusivity because it takes seriously the “otherness” of the others; it lets them be who they are. Canada’s historic potentiality for accepting and being hospitable towards difference is gravely under threat today—threatened by those who emphasize the particularity and specialness of one group, thus jeopardizing the whole, and by forces of globalization which destroy real distinctiveness ... As Christians in Canada today, we have an ethical mandate

to fashion and inculcate a vision for our country that honors and fosters both unity and difference.²⁶

How do you experience “otherness” or “specialness” in your setting? How has your church understood and practiced “hospitality” toward others? What kind of hospitality could bring healing to troubled communities?

Religion

Census figures for 1996 report that main-line denominations (Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Lutheran and Presbyterian) comprise 85 percent of the Christian community and so-called conservative Protestants (Mennonite, Pentecostal, Missionary Alliance, Salvation Army, Baptist, etc.) are about 8 percent of the Canadian church scene. Lutherans represent 2.4 percent of the population and Anglicans 8.1 percent. The number of people who claim no religious affiliation has almost doubled from 1981 to 1991, increasing to 12.5 percent of the total population.

The leading researcher on religion in Canada reports that religion no longer occupies center stage in Canadian society. It has ceased to be life-informing for the average Canadians, who have moved from religious “commitment” to religious “consumption.”²⁷ Religious participation in Canada is down sharply from the 60 percent of members who attended church weekly in 1945 to 23 percent in 1995. Few people, however, are actively leaving the church. They still identify with religion but want to access it *à la carte*—not participating in church life regularly but seeking it out for baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. Religious memory is everywhere and there is an extensive receptivity to spirituality.

How does this compare to the religious participation in your country?



A significant expression of Canada's cooperative movements has been the leadership of the churches with their strong history of ecumenical initiative and cooperation in addressing issues of justice and peace. Moving beyond mere cooperation, the churches have established several independent ecumenical organizations in areas of research, policy development, advocacy, education and grass-roots mobilization. In 2001, these separate organizations came together in *KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives*, to focus the work of churches and religious organizations on promoting international human rights, global economic justice, environmental and ecological justice, Canadian social development and advocacy for Aboriginal peoples.

Lutherans in Canada

The first service of Lutheran worship in North America took place in 1619 near Churchill, on Hudson Bay in northern Manitoba. It was led by the Danish Pastor, Rasmus Jensen, who accompanied an ill-fated expedition seeking a northwest passage to Asia. Early German Lutheran settlement in Nova Scotia began over 250 years ago, and several congregations in those early years became Anglican. To find pastors to serve communities of German-speaking and Nordic immigrants, relationships developed among various Lutheran synods and councils on a North American basis. Thus by the mid-1960s, most of the Lutheran congregations in Canada were members of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC–MS).

In 1967 and 1968, the congregations of the Canada District of the ALC became autonomous to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC). In 1986, the Canada Section of the LCA joined with the ELCC to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) with 652 congregations and 210,000 members (declining to 627 congregations and about 189,000 members in 2001). The church has five synods, two seminaries (Saskatoon and Waterloo), and two colleges and two high schools in western Canada. New ethnic ministries consist of 10 Chinese congregations and one mission, totaling about 1,200 members; two Aboriginal missions; one Vietnamese mission; and one Spanish mission. Several congregations continue with services in German, Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian.

Canada is also home to congregations of the Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian diaspora churches; the church offices of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad are in Toronto. Canadian congregations of the LC-MS formed the

We commit ourselves as church through prayer, study and conversation, to discern what it is for us to live faithfully under the cross in this time and place, seeing the world through the event of the cross. We will enter into the lives of people in our local, national and global communities. We commit ourselves as church to communicate clearly with one another and with society. We commit ourselves to openness and trust. We will listen to the voices of our church and society and respond to their needs.

(1997 Evangelical Declaration of the ELCIC)

autonomous Lutheran Church–Canada (LC-C) in 1988 with about 80,000 members, and church offices in Winnipeg. The ELCIC and LC-C participate jointly in Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR).

In 1995, the ELCIC convention took bold action to eliminate the structure of divisions and offices (modeled on much larger churches in the USA) and to replace it with a more flexible organization of staff and working groups involving synodical representation. The 1997 convention embraced an *Evangelical Declaration* “as our church’s vision for life and mission for the next decade (1997–2007).” This Declaration begins,

God calls us, through Word and Sacrament, to be disciples and to make disciples. Our discipleship is defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Our mission is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people in Canada and around the world through the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the Sacraments, and through service in Christ’s name.

In 2001 the ELCIC observed the 25th anniversary of ordaining women with celebrations and an intensive study of

women’s experiences in ministry. More than 140 women have served as ordained pastors of the ELCIC.

Regional expression of communion

In order to deepen the regional expression of communion, an LWF regional office for North America was established in

How does communion break through the barriers between people and communities? How have language or hopes of communion become realities in your region?

1998 as a cooperative effort of the LWF and the region’s member churches. In 2000 the first LWF consultation of North American churches was held to strengthen relationships, reflect on mission in North America to explore what communion might involve beyond occasional cooperation. The consultation questioned what it is about boundaries (of nation, race, gender, age, status, denomination, etc.) that keeps us apart and defines communities and people as “dif-

The North American farm crisis highlights how relationships that support economic globalization make it nearly impossible for “winners” and “losers” to communicate. In difficult times, farmers across the 49th parallel (between the US and Canada) become adversaries because they operate within separate national economic systems. The church and its expression of communion can create the space where stories are shared, where systems are held accountable, and where alternative relationships are inspired. Taking the experiences and life-situations of others seriously will transform us—even, and perhaps especially, in the church.

(2000 LWF North America Consultation)

ferent.” For example, the young adults emphasized that youth feel isolated even within the church, and that their gifts are consistently not appreciated. Participants noted that, most of the time, churches and leaders become preoccupied with maintaining ministries and responding to crises that relate to our separate “territories” of mission. They realized they need “someone from outside” to ask and invite them into a larger and richer context and community, which is what the communion provides.

Full communion with the Anglican Church of Canada

In July 2001, the Waterloo Declaration joined the ELCIC and the Anglican Church of Canada in a relationship of full communion—affirming what was already the practical reality in many communities. This Declaration involves

transferability of members; mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries; freedom to use each other’s liturgies; freedom to participate in each other’s ordinations and installations of clergy, including bishops; and structures for consultation to express, strengthen and enable our common life, witness and service, to the glory of God and the salvation of the world.²⁸

Alongside this process of bilateral dialogue with the ELCIC, the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) has been facing the consequences of its ministries in Aboriginal residential schools which are now acknowledged to have abused significant numbers of Aboriginal children. The ELCIC experience of walking together with the ACC—along the road of guilt, repentance and seeking to make amends with Aboriginal people and communities, many of whom are members and leaders within the same church—has drawn the two churches even closer together. Where the ELCIC has had limited experience in ministry among Aboriginal peoples, the experience of the ACC opens up opportunities to learn and grow together—as churches and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people—in serving God’s mission in the world and in Canada.

Hosting the Tenth Assembly

In planning to host the Tenth Assembly, the ELCIC has chosen to emphasize the vision of hospitality. Any sense of barriers or separation into camps of “hosts” and “visitors” is removed when hospitality is combined with the Assembly theme. As we plan to gather, we trust that it is God who will host us in Winnipeg and daily throughout the world in our own national, local and community contexts.

After almost three days of weeping and unburdening their pain and trauma concerning residential schools, the community gathered for a healing service. Moments before the service began, Archbishop Michael Peers, Primate of the ACC, asked permission to speak: “...Together here with you, I have listened as you have told your stories.... I accept and I confess, before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you.... On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology....” A profound silence filled the room as people tried to understand what this action meant. Then there was the sound of weeping around the room as the impact of the apology began to sink in. The healing could begin now.

(Report from the 2nd Anglican National Native Convocation, 1993)

C. Preparing for the Assembly

It is expected that the healing theme will be reflected in the overall process of what is experienced and not just talked about at the Assembly. Given the holistic nature of what healing entails, it is important that this become more than just an Assembly of many words. The healing of memories, relationships and persons often occurs through the sharing of stories, songs and symbolic rituals, as well as through conversations with one another. In addition to our minds, our bodies and emotions need to be engaged.

Participants will be bringing many different concerns for healing, and many examples of how healing is occurring in their contexts. We need to be able to hear and learn from one another, across the boundaries that usually separate us and our particular concerns. In these ways, what it means for the LWF to be a communion can mature and be deepened.

As we share with one another, our differences are likely to become apparent. How can we listen and talk about these differences, and the different pieties and moral positions we have as churches in our diverse cultural settings? How might healing be embodied in how we “do business” with one another? How can we move beyond what can be caricatures of churches in “the North” or “the South” to more authentic relationships of sharing and receiving, of critiquing and being vulnerable? Might there be some public symbolic acts of reconciliation that go be-

yond the convention hall? How can this Assembly inspire and empower member churches and local congregations to become healing communities, equipped for a array of healing ministries in the world?

Living out the theme during the days of the Assembly

After the opening day of the Assembly, a continuous series of prayer petitions will weave throughout the rest of the days. One petition of a prayer will become the overall emphasis for each day. Worship will frame and permeate each day, from the morning Eucharist to the noon day prayers to the evening prayers and occasional services of healing. By beginning each day with worship, our grounding, identity and source of all healing is made clear. We begin with praise for God’s gifts which we receive through bread and wine, earthly elements that put us in touch with ourselves and the world, and empower us to face together the painful realities in need of healing.

When participants gather in the plenary hall, voices from different parts of the world will “cry out” some of the needs for healing in their context, followed by the plenary presentation of the Bible study by one of the regions. One or both of the printed Bible studies (see

Each member church is encouraged to identify stories or examples of the kinds of healing that are especially needed in their context. Many of these will be briefly shared during a number of the plenary sessions at the Assembly. On one of the evenings, participants are invited to share resources, approaches and practices related to healing in different contexts. On Sunday, as part of an outdoor celebration, each region is invited to reflect on and bring to the Assembly symbols expressing what “healing the land” means for them.

part II of this book) will provide a basis for this. Afterwards, small group Bible studies will continue in the Village Group settings.

The Village Groups will serve several important purposes at the Assembly. They are the place where:

- Small group Bible study discussions take place.
- Closer interpersonal relationships are developed, experiences shared, and hopefully some healing experienced.
- Challenges of intercultural communication are faced and dealt with.
- The theological substance of what we are about as a communion “for the healing of the world” is explored and deepened.
- The healing challenges in the church and the world are probed and analyzed.
- Designated aspects of the work of the LWF are considered, in order to propose directions and new commitments for the future work of the LWF.

Because this is where much that is central to the purpose of the Assembly will occur, five sessions will be spent in Village Groups. Out of this work will come the substance for the Assembly Message and recommendations for future LWF work, which will later be considered in plenary.

Most days will also involve a considerable amount of time spent in plenary business sessions. There will be a special public outdoor celebration on Sunday, and lots of time for informal interaction with participants from around the world, as together we experience what it means to be transformed into a communion.

The Writing Team for the Bible studies and Village Group chapters

In November 2001, a twelve-person Writing Team for the Assembly Study Book was gathered from member churches around the world. Together with a number of LWF staff, they probed more deeply into the theme, planned what should be covered and how, and prepared to write the Bible studies and the initial drafts to support and focus the work that is expected to occur in the Village Groups. Members of the team included:

Manas Buthelezi (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa), former bishop of the Central Diocese

Christoffer H. Grundmann (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover—Germany), professor of religion and the healing arts, Valparaiso University (USA)

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Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), adjunct pro-

fessor of Christian ethics at Seattle University and Fuller Theological Seminary

Iara Müller (Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil), pastor currently studying in the USA

Tiit Pädam (Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church), rector of the Theological Institute

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Turid Karlsen Seim (Church of Norway), professor of theology (New Testament) University of Oslo

Authors of the Bible studies are listed at the end of their respective pieces. The Village Group chapters (see part III) have been written in a more collaborative process so that the final version generally reflects the work of more than one author, and has undergone various revisions by the editor, as well as by others. Special thanks go to those who did the initial writing for these chapters:

- A. "God's healing gift of justification" – Guillermo Hansen
- B. "God's healing gift of communion" – Manas Buthelezi
- C. "Healing divisions within the one Church" – Guillermo Hansen
- D. "The mission of the Church in multi-faith contexts" – Ingo Wulfhorst (staff)
- E. "Removing barriers that exclude" – Iara Müller
- F. "The Church's ministry of healing" – Christoffer H. Grundmann
- G. "Justice and healing in families" – Paul Isaak
- H. "Overcoming violence" – Monica J. Melanchthon
- I. "Transforming economic globalization" – Cynthia Moe-Lobeda
- J. "Healing creation" – Norman Habel and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

This book would not have been possible without the assistance of a number of LWF staff persons.



Notes

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- ² “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” in E. Theodore Bachmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 58.
- ³ Schwöbel, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 279.
- ⁴ The following section draws on Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 353–419.
- ⁵ Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition, LWF Documentation 47* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001).
- ⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness. Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 198.
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- ⁸ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 15.
- ⁹ Paul D. Hanson, *A People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 77.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 397; p. 417.
- ¹¹ Paul Chung, “An Ecumenical Legacy of Martin Luther and Asian Theology” (unpublished manuscript), p. 6.
- ¹² John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 25.
- ¹³ Hanson, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 398.
- ¹⁴ Larry Rasmussen and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “The Reform Dynamic,” in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds.), *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 137.
- ¹⁵ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 474.
- ¹⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), p. 210. Much of what follows is based on her historical interpretation and re-conception of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- ¹⁸ Lee E. Snook, *What in the World is God Doing? Re-imagining Spirit and Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 29.
- ¹⁹ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 143.
- ²⁰ LaCugna, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 382.
- ²¹ Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism, in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 355.
- ²² Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, transl. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 155.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Canada Could Have a Future (and the Churches Could Help!): An Exercise in Contextual Theology*, lecture in the series, "Keeping the Spirit Alive," St. Stephen's College, Edmonton and Calgary, 1998.

²⁵ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, official Web site, April 2002.

²⁶ Hall, *op. cit.* (note 24).

²⁷ Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: the Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1988); *There's Got to be More: Connecting Churches and Canadians* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995); *Mosaic Madness* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1990).

²⁸ "Called to Full Communion," adopted by the National Convention of the ELCIC and the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2001.

Part II: Daily Emphases and Bible Studies





Day 1: For the Healing of the World

Genesis 2:4–10, 15

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. [...] ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

When I was a boy on the farm, my father would take me into the dry fields and walk slowly across the ground prepared for sowing—before the rains came. He would kneel, take a handful of earth, hold it in his palms for some time and let it run slowly through his fingers back to the ground. In that moment, he seemed to connect with the very soul of the soil as he said, “Good earth. This is good earth.”

You are invited to re-read this text from Genesis with this same kind of feel for the earth. Imagine walking back into the dry fields where God began creating and ask the question, How am I connected with the earth in this story?

Dry fields

The story takes us back to the very beginning, “when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Genesis 2:5 goes on to describe the dry fields:

when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground.

Why are these four mentioned? All are needed for the dry fields at the beginning of creation to become the green planet we call home. It indicates that humans are created for the benefit of earth rather than earth for the benefit of humans.

The earth connection: One of the first connections we need to make is with the ground. The Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*, is similar to the word *adam*. The word *adam* refers, of course, to the first man. But *adam* can also refer to a human being. So the first *adam* comes from the *adamah*, the stuff of earth. Humans come from the ground of the dry fields. This connection suggests a special kinship between humans and the ground/earth.

A living being

God then takes some dust from the ground and forms a human being. The dust from the dry fields is the very basic stuff of earth. Humans are made from the stuff of earth that all life shares. They are part of the fragile web of life, myriad fragments of animated dust called earth.

In light of this mystery, how do you view the very ground on which you walk? How should we feel about matter, the very stuff of all life? What is the intimate connection or kinship between humans and other created life?

According to this account, the first human being is formed by God. God does not make humans appear instantly. The Hebrew word for form refers to what potters do when they meticulously mold clay into a shape they imagine. Here God is pictured as a potter molding the dust of the *adamah* into an *adam*.

The breath connection: After God the potter molds the first human, God breathes life into the human’s nostrils. A more common word for breath, wind or spirit (*ruach*), is found in Genesis 1:2 where the spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. In the Genesis 2 story, however, the Hebrew word means personal breath (*neshamah*). We breathe the personal breath of God—which is life itself.

What happens when God imparts personal breath to this earthy human being? Something extraordinary? Some-

thing unusual? Yes and No! This human being is one of the wonderful works that our Creator made from clay in the beginning. But what results is a living being, an expression that refers to any of the living creatures of this planet. Humans are but one living organism in an ecosystem of innumerable living organisms. From the beginning we have been made part of the web of organic life.

A green garden

God the potter becomes a gardener. Somewhere among the dry fields that existed at the beginning, God planted a garden. The story says that this garden is located in a place called Eden, in the East. If the storyteller were an Israelite, then this would probably mean East of Palestine. The Hebrew word for East can also be translated as ancient past. All we know is that in the beginning God planted a garden. More importantly, this garden was created as a home for humans and other living creatures. What are the implications of saying that the garden God planted was a home for humans? If so, how should we treat it?

God the gardener caused a variety of trees to grow in the garden. Perhaps then this is not really a garden, but more like a forest. In this forest are four kinds of trees: trees that make earth beautiful; trees that provide food; the tree of life in the middle of the garden; and the tree of knowing good and evil.

In the story that follows, the first humans eat from the tree of knowing good and evil and are prevented from eating from the tree of life. God says that had they eaten from the tree of life at that time, they would have lived forever (Gen 3:22). In commenting on this story, Luther says that Adam and Eve were created as mortals; had they not sinned, but eaten from the tree of life, they would have fallen asleep among the roses when they died, and awoken to eternal life.

How are we connected with the tree of life in the center of the garden? Does it still stand at the center of earth, or must we wait until the new earth appears when the tree of life will again provide fruit and healing? (see the Bible study on Rev 22:1-2)

A deep river

Verses 10–14 are often ignored because they describe an ancient geography that seems to make little sense to us today. The important feature of this part of the story, is the river. It begins in Eden, God's sacred forest garden where the tree of life grows, and flows out of Eden in four directions. This river not only waters the garden of Eden, it also waters the garden of earth outside Eden. We live by the water from this river.

A healing connection: If the fountains and rivers of earth flow out from Eden, then they are more than mere water. Their source is Eden. They flow from God's own garden, God's life-giving presence. This implies that they are also life-giving waters with healing powers. In other words, they are sacramental.

If the rivers of earth are viewed as living waters flowing from God, perhaps these should be considered waters for healing, as many indigenous peoples do. Namaan is healed by washing in the Jordan river (2 Kings 5:8–14). The blind man is healed by washing in the waters of Siloam (Jn 9:1–7).

What is the significance of water in your culture? When we pollute the waters, what are we really doing?

Honoring earth

What is the role that humans are expected to play in the garden? The Hebrew text of Genesis 2:15 says that humans are chosen to '*abad* the ground of earth. This Hebrew word can mean three things: to

till/tend the ground, to serve someone, or to honor someone as in worship. Perhaps all these meanings are intended.

Genesis 2:5 announces that at the beginning there was no one to ‘*abad*’ the ground. Here the meaning is probably “till.” In verse 15, however, the word is coupled with *shamar* to “keep” or “protect,” and implies that the first humans were responsible for protecting and nurturing God’s garden. The first humans were to honor earth by serving and protecting it.

What do you think it means for us today to honor earth? How have we dishonored earth? How is the task of assisting in the healing of creation a continuation of our intended role as humans created to serve and protect earth?

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For further discussion

In the past, many interpreters have assumed the role of humans outlined in Genesis 1:26–28 to be primary and the role outlined in Genesis 2:15 to be secondary. What do you think?

Is dominating justified in the light of the Genesis 2 text discussed above? How can we counter the assumption of many rulers, companies and landholders that humans have a right to use the earth for their interests and ignore its rights? Does the earth have rights?

According to Genesis 1:26–28, God created humans in God’s image. Their role is described as “having dominion” over living creatures of land, sea and air, and “subduing” the earth. The verb “have dominion” (*rada*) means “to rule” or “dominate.” It is a very forceful term. When a king rules, according to Psalm 72:8–11, his enemies lick the dust at his feet. When Joshua “subdued” (*kabash*) the land of Canaan, he conquered, killed and destroyed. These two verbs “have dominion” and “subdue” have meanings opposite to the two verbs “till/serve” and “keep/protect” which are used in Genesis 2:25 to describe the role of humans.

Which of these texts should have priority, and help to interpret the other? Given your understanding of our roles revealed through Jesus Christ, which of these would seem to be more consistent with the gospel? (note Mk 10:41–45)

It is significant that the mandate to dominate in Genesis 1 provided the basis for humans, especially in the Western world, to exploit the earth’s resources and harness nature by using violence.

Norman Habel



Revelation 22:1–5

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

What are the names of the rivers in your life? What is the geography through which God's healing river flows for you? Where can we glimpse God's holy city, New Jerusalem, in the world today? In what ways have you experienced God's river of life and the healing leaves of the tree of life in your own life and in the life of the world?

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, ..." (Ps 46:4). Two rivers come together at Winnipeg: the Red and the Assiniboine Rivers. When participants from all around the world gather at Winnipeg's two rivers, they also gather around God's great "river of life" flowing through all the rivers of their lives. Revelation 22 invites us to explore God's river and tree of life as imagery of hope and healing. In this study, we will explore its healing power for our lives and communities today.

Revelation 22 in context

The New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21–22 is one of the most wonderful and hope-filled visions in all of Scripture. It comes at the end of the book's apocalyptic journey—a journey that has taken us to the throne of God (Rev 4–5), a journey into the heart of the universe and the heart of imperial power, a journey of radical hope and transformation. Written at a time when Rome was at the height of its power, Revelation invokes familiar apocalyptic imagery and patterns from the Old Testament, as a way of critiquing Roman imperial injustice ("Babylon") and offers an alternative vision for our future in God's city of well-being.

When looking at texts from Revelation, we should resist efforts to try to "figure out" Revelation's symbols as if they were timetables for the end of the world or codes to be deciphered. Rather, Revelation is best experienced like a work of poetry or music. Its language is evocative. Enter with John into

the apocalyptic journey, a journey that comes to completion in the vision of a renewed earth in Revelation 21–22. Tour the holy city with John, as the angel leads us through its open gates and welcoming street. This text offers an anticipatory vision of our future with God, in a wondrous city or *polis* of healing and life for the world.

A tour of God's wondrous city

The tour of the city began in Revelation 21:9, revealing the city's beauty and radiance. Revelation 22:1–6, the final section of this city vision, features paradise-like images of nature and healing—a sort of re-creation of the garden of Eden in the center of this huge urban landscape. Here God, nature and human beings are reconciled.¹

The landscape of God's city contrasts sharply with that of the evil city of Babylon/Rome (Rev 17–18), a political economy that was characterized by violence, unfettered commerce and injustice. In order to participate in the New Jerusalem, God's people are called to "come out" of Babylon (Rev 18:4) so that they may "enter into the city by the gates" (Rev 22:14).

As the angel leads John on a tour of this wondrous city, what specific features do you notice in this vision that speak to you? Read the text and imagine yourself walking into this city through its open gates, exploring the landscape that the angel unfolds before you.

River

First, notice the river of the "water of life" flowing through the middle of the city, giving life to everything it touches. Water, freely given by God, abounds in this paradise-like landscape. Revelation's

river of life recalls the rivers of Eden and all the other biblical rivers.

Read Ezekiel 47, the specific river on which this vision is most closely modeled. Ezekiel's lavish vision is of an ever-deepening river, flowing out from the new temple. Notice the source from which Revelation's life-giving river originates, as compared to Ezekiel 47. Since Revelation has stated that there is "no temple" in the holy city (Rev 21:22), the river of life flows out not from the temple but from "throne of God and of the lamb."

Throne

This image of the "throne," which recurs twice in this passage (Rev 22:1, 3), is a central image for Revelation. God is called the "One who sits on the throne," an implicit political critique of the Roman emperor who also sits enthroned and demands people's worship and allegiance. Only God—not the empire—is worthy of worship. John's apocalyptic journey began in chapters 4–5 with an invitation to go up into heaven in order to view God's throne and to see the slain lamb, Jesus, standing before the throne.

But where is the "throne of God and of the lamb" located in Revelation 22? The text suggests that God's throne will move down from heaven, where it was in chapter 4, and will be located in the midst of the city that descends out of heaven (see Rev 21:2). Thus, the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22 can be read as a wonderfully earth-centered vision of our future, a vision of hope for the world. Contrary to the escapism or "heavenism" that dominates some fundamentalist interpretations today, the picture of Revelation suggests that our future dwelling will be with God in a radiant, thriving cityscape. This text can inspire us to trust God in the midst of our world and its crises. After Revelation 21:2 "heaven" is not mentioned again in Revelation.

Tree of life

Enter more deeply into the picture, continuing the city tour. What else do you see? Notice the tree of life growing on both banks of the river. Look up into the tree's branches and see the succulent fruit growing all year long. The tree's abundant fruit overcomes the threat of poverty and hunger that haunted many of John's readers in the first century, as also today. Fruit of the tree fulfills the promise to the church in Ephesus that we will "eat of the fruit of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7). In contrast to the economy of Babylon/Rome which was characterized by famine and hunger (Rev 18:8), God's holy city provides enough food for all.

How does this speak to issues of hunger in your community?

Revelation's tree of life also hearkens back to Genesis 2–3, the story of the Garden of Eden. The curse of Genesis 3:24 and the expulsion of the garden are now overcome. In Revelation we all are granted a share in the tree of life (Rev 22:14, 19).

The tree of life is a biblical image that is also common to many other religions, including

the menorah of Judaism, the tree pattern on an Islamic prayer carpet, the kadamba tree of Krishna in Hinduism, the bodhi tree in Buddhism... and the Lakota tree of life at the center of the world.²

Revelation's nation-healing tree of life can invite us into inter-religious dialogue with people of other faiths.

Is there a tree of life in your own cultural tradition? In that of other faiths around you? How does it relate to this biblical image?

The leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations

Look more closely at the leaves on the tree of life. These leaves are medicine (*therapeia*), in contrast to the toxic drugs and sorcery (*pharmakeia*) of evil Babylon/Rome (Rev 18:23). Revelation's tree and its healing leaves are modeled on Ezekiel 47:12, but note the way Revelation deliberately expands Ezekiel's vision to make it even more inclusive and wonderful. The tree is now the tree of life, and Ezekiel's "leaves for healing" have become "leaves for the healing of the nations." New Jerusalem is a multicultural city whose citizenship and healing extends to all nations.

The theme for the Assembly is based on Revelation's image of the tree of life with its leaves for the healing of the world. Whether a literal image of the actual medicinal properties of trees, or metaphorical imagery of spiritual healing, this text proclaims healing for our world and for each one of us. Notice that healing in this text does not come directly from God or the Lamb but through the created world—through the leaves of the tree of life.

Healing in this text is for the "nations." God's holy city includes not only one ethnic group but all the "nations" who walk

by the city's light in Revelation 21:24 and bring their glory into the city in Revelation 21:26. The repetition of "nations" in Revelation 21–22 offers a positive image of globalization that can help us address issues of globalization in our world today.

God's servants shall reign

The tour of the city concludes with references to God's servants who offer service and worship (*latreusousin*) before the throne (Rev 22:3). Most amazingly of all, God's servants shall "reign" forever and ever (Rev 22:5). Think how empowering this promise of reigning must have been for powerless people at the time it was written, and how empowering it can be for the marginalized and powerless people in our world today. At a time when Rome claimed to reign over the entire world, Revelation boldly proclaimed that it is God who reigns—not the Roman Empire, nor any other empire—and that God's servants will also reign with God. Note, however, that there is no object of the verb "reign" in Revelation 22:5. God's servants do not reign over anyone else. What then does our reigning with God and Christ mean? The concluding verse of this text invites us to explore ways we can understand our reign not as domination over anyone or anything but as sharing in healing the world.

Barbara Rossing

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Luke 7:18b–23

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples ¹⁹ and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” “ ²¹ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

This is the burning question to which John the Baptist requests an answer from Jesus. We might have expected it in the beginning when little was known and even less seen or heard. But at this stage? How can John not know? Has he not heard? Did he not listen to what Jesus’ disciples just reported? Are the reports dubious? Are not the compelling words and wondrous deeds convincing evidence?

Do Jesus’ healings prove the validity of his claims about salvation and liberation? Does the question arise from John’s dawning conviction or from his growing doubt?

John does not himself appear before Jesus. The communication between the two happens indirectly; they do not meet face-to-face. The disciples of John serve as his go-betweens, and in Jesus’ presence, the question of John is faithfully repeated word for word. As readers we cannot possibly miss it:

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Does John simply ask a question to which he already knows the answer? Is it all for the benefit of his disciples?

The question reveals a state of longing and waiting as well as of expectation. Someone is to come, whose presence they ought to recognize. Which signs should they look for? How can they be certain? The very fact that the question is being asked like this, and at this stage, reveals the ambiguities of any presupposition. Their fragile interpretive efforts in-

How and where do these tensions between expectation and reality arise for you?

dicating their desire to make what is there correspond to what they want to be there. Will expectation and experience ever meet? If multiple interpretations are possible, if taking offence may seem to be as reasonable as believing, what is there to help make the right decision?

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

John’s question is not evaded; this is not a trap set by clever opponents. The answer is awkward in the sense that it does not add anything to what John and his disciples already seem to know. Before Jesus himself speaks, the author comments to us as readers, giving us some background information. We are told that Jesus had just cured many people. Surprisingly, the rather awkward list of specific ailments does not correspond to any of the individual healing stories, nor does it reflect the examples given by Jesus.

It does give the impression of a large-scale healing activity on the part of Jesus. He may have been an especially successful miracle worker, but he was not the only one around. Diviners and miracle workers, wonder workers with a wide variety of specialties, were a well-known feature throughout the ancient world. Some of them did remarkably well. When Christians told the stories about Jesus’ healings, they followed a well established, common pattern. The presence of others, even competing wonder workers and exorcists is recognized in the Gospels, not least by Luke. He reports in Acts on several incidents, such as Simon (Acts 8:9–13) and Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:4–12) and the less successful sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11–15). In Luke 11:19 other exorcists are mentioned within the framework of a discussion about the exorcisms of Jesus.

The debate in Luke 11:14–23 confirms that even Jesus’ opponents are amazed

by his wondrous performance. No one questions the fact of his healings. The conflict concerns the power involved: is it Beelzebul or the “the finger of God”? Jesus argues eloquently that it is ridiculous to assume that Beelzebul would fight and thereby weaken himself. When Jesus overpowers evil, it is a sign that the kingdom of God has come.

Luke goes further than the other evangelists in rendering healing stories as exorcisms. This reflects that at the time diseases were often—and medical science today would say mistakenly—explained as possessions, as evil intrusions into the person. As exorcism the healing stories take on a symbolic dimension of liberation from bondage; they become incidents of an almost cosmic struggle with the evil one. Luke therefore tends to see miracles as forceful demonstrations of divine power and might. When Jesus calls his first disciples in Luke 5:1–11, they do not leave everything behind and follow him just because of his compelling words. A miracle precedes their calling; they are already awed by the enormous catch of fish he has wondrously provided.

Modern people, informed by science, tend to be troubled by the fact that miracles and healing took place. Their question is incompatible with and not addressed by the biblical stories. However, the stories do address another troublesome concern: what if miracles do not happen? Only some are healed, most are not. We may try to solve this by making a distinction between “healing” and “cure,” claiming that healing may take place even when the person is not cured. The point is not to be healthy, but to be whole.

Does this distinction between “healing” and “cure” help clarify the issue, or obscure it? The New Testament passages on which we draw tend to mingle, rather than distinguish the terms. Is a different approach possible?

How are diseases explained in your culture?

Jesus does not flaunt miracles and healing at every possible occasion. He restrains himself, especially when miracles he is invited to perform miracles in order to prove himself. It is no use asking for signs (Lk 11:16f; 11:29–32). In the beginning when tempted by the devil, Jesus refuses to submit to the tempting promises of immediate satisfaction by putting God to test (Lk 4:1–12). When he is mocked and taunted on the cross, and challenged to prove himself as Messiah by saving himself (“he who has saved others”), he does not step down. He chooses the stony road where suffering and pain are inevitable. He submits to the mysterious will of God that says life is gained only by being given up. Ultimately, healing can happen only through what seems to be its contradiction.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

What is uniquely Christian is not faith in Jesus the wonder maker but faith in Jesus, the wounded healer, the crucified Messiah. There were no expectations of a crucified Messiah, nor any indications of messianic miracles. John the Baptist had every good reason to ask as he did.

On what grounds should John have been convinced about Jesus? Is the answer given in Luke 7:21–23 more persuasive than what John had already heard?

Jesus does not respond by establishing his credentials in referring to appropriate Messianic titles and labels. He only proves himself by re-telling the same story. His words recall the prophet Isaiah’s promises as they echo his reading in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (Lk 4:16–21). He

reiterates the claim that in his mighty words and deeds these promises and “the year of God’s favor” are being fulfilled for their ears and eyes. They have seen it happening. Go and tell! This, of course, they had been doing already.

In the end, therefore, the challenge of the answer is the concluding beatitude: blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. In the end, no further evidence is—nor can be—provided. In the end, it is matter of choice. In the end, it is a matter of taking offense or not. In the

end, it is a matter of recognition and of faith.

As the gospel continues beyond this brief passage, Jesus commends John to the crowds. John is not reproached, but praised. However, “the people of this generation”—of any generation—are lamented. They are never content. They are like displeased children. There is always something wrong.

Go and tell that he has come!

Turid Karlsen Seim

What will it take to satisfy the disciples? What does it take to satisfy us? Will we always keep looking for who or what will more adequately meet our expectations? How are we tempted to change Jesus to fit our expectations?



Day 2:

O God, the Healer, Liberator, Savior of the World

Isaiah 42:1–12

¹ Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵ Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. ¹⁰ Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. ¹¹ Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains. ¹² Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

Our modern world seems to be easily captivated by heroes. Sporting champions, movie stars and the powerful rich hit the headlines and revel in the glory. The way of the world is the way of human glory. The way of God, in this text, is a different way: the way of the servant, the way of the cross.

The context

This text is one of a cluster of texts from chapters 40–55 in Isaiah that focus on the figure of the servant. These poems, therefore, are sometimes called “Servant Songs.” The key figure or character in these poems is usually called the “Suffering Servant.” (cf. Isa 42:1–4, 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12).

We are not sure when these poems were written, but they clearly reflect a period of suffering and oppression for God’s people, perhaps the period when part of God’s people were in exile in Babylon (after 586 BCE) and the rest were ruled by foreigners in Palestine.

This study will focus on the first of these poems, but we should be aware that in the final poem, one of the key roles of this servant figure is that of healer. Keep this passage in mind, especially as it relates to the above poem:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed (Isa 53:4–5).

These verses make it clear that what happens to the servant “makes us whole,” that is, brings us true *shalom* and “healing.” With this and the Assembly theme in mind, we might well designate this figure the Healing Servant.

In these poems, what kind of suffering does the Suffering Servant seem to be experiencing? Share examples of how are you familiar with such suffering.

My servant

The “servant” designation is significant. The Hebrew term *‘ebed* usually means slave or someone who serves another. In the ancient world, a king or queen had many slaves. Often they were prisoners captured in battle. As slaves, they had no rights; they were the property of their owners.

In the famous Year of Jubilee text (Lev 25), it is worth noting that Yahweh calls the Israelites who were rescued from slavery in Egypt “my servants/slaves” (*‘ebed*). All Israelites, who became hired servants due to debt, were to be freed in the Year of Jubilee. The same was not true, however, for non-Israelites “from the nations” who had become “servants/slaves” (*‘ebed*) to Israelites. Non-Israelites slaves remained slaves (Lev 25:39–46).

The term “servant” *‘ebed* usually refers to those in society who were the oppressed and deprived—the slaves. Yet, God uses the expression “my servant” to address the chosen ones such as Moses (Josh 1:2). In our text, Yahweh, through the prophet, is referring to a particular servant who has been chosen to play the role of “the healing servant.” Recall that in the Bible study on Genesis 2, God gave humans the task of being servants to earth.

The choice of this figure as the one chosen by Yahweh to play a special role is confirmed by God’s claim that “I have put my spirit upon him.” This healing servant is anointed and filled with the spirit of God. The spirit (*ruach*) can refer to the life breath that animates and heals all of earth (see the study on Ps 104:29), and to a special gift from God to achieve special purposes (Mic 3:8).

Healing justice

Verses 2–3 of this text are quite remarkable. They depict this servant as a quiet, gentle, compassionate, caring person. Like a servant or slave who has experienced the pain of being crushed and humiliated, he will identify with the weak and the broken; he is one of them. In short, “the bruised and fragile being will not break”! This figure will not be like an ancient king arrayed in glory, who makes loud proclamations in the street; this is a sensitive, silent slave.

The goal of this servant is to bring healing through justice. Three times in the first four verses the term “justice” (*mishpat*) is used to describe the servant’s role. The quiet, compassionate identification of the servant with the broken is not only a reflection of his style, but of the very way to justice that he represents: the way of the servant/cross. Or, as verse 3 summarizes, “he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

The term justice (*mishpat*) in this context (as in the study on Mic 6:8) refers neither to legal decisions nor to retribution (retributive justice), but to the process of restoring and healing (restorative justice). Justice is the process of setting things right, especially for those who are oppressed or rejected, downtrodden or violated. The measure of a ruler’s justice is the way she or he treats the widow, the orphan, or the oppressed who are deprived of property and rights.

Liberating justice

The justice that this servant enacts is really the work of God the Liberator. Yahweh claims to have taken this servant by the hand as part of God’s saving and righteous work (verse 6a). This saving work involves liberating those who are in prison and darkness, removing the agony and humiliation of unjust suffering (verse 7).

Are there “healers” in your community who claim to have been filled with the spirit, or special powers to heal? How do they operate? Are they like servants who heal gently? Or, are they more sensational, seeking glory through the healing? What kind of healing does this servant do? How does he go about this?

The great enigma of this passage is the role this servant plays as “a covenant of the people” and “a light of the nations.” In that context, there is no reason to think of this as referring to the later missionary task of taking the gospel to all nations. Some scholars believe that bringing light to the nations means the verdict of Yahweh—that Yahweh is the only true God and all others are nothing—is to be revealed to enlighten the nations (as in Isa 41:21–24).

If, however, we remember the role of the servant as the agent of healing and restoration, the focus seems to be on more than a declaration of Yahweh’s status as God. Rather, through the servant an alternative way to justice unfolds—not only for Israel but also for the nations and indeed, as verse 4 acclaims, for the earth. This way of justice is the way of healing for humanity and for the earth.

Why is the term “covenant” used in verse 6? A person is not a covenant or treaty. The implication seems to be that the healing servant is a vehicle to create covenant bonds between people and peoples, humans and earth. Perhaps our modern equivalent is reconciliation, the process whereby peace and healing between conflicting groups and peoples is achieved. Healing justice means reconciliation.

How is justice understood in your community? When people in your community cry “we want justice!” do they reflect this biblical view of justice? Where do you see healing justice in action?

In Australia, the name of the movement to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is known as the “journey of healing.” Are there groups in your community or church who act as healing servants to bring reconciliation and hope to conflicting peoples or parties? What kinds of processes are consistent with the “servant way” of a healing servant community? (Note the steps toward reconciliation suggested at the end of the Village Group chapter on “Removing Barriers that Exclude”)

in Jesus, who walks the way of the cross as the Suffering Servant who brings healing to us all, healing from our sins, liberation from death and reconciliation with God and between peoples.

How does Jesus reveal to us the way of the Healing Servant? What kind of way is the way of the cross or servant? How can we live that way, following Christ the Healing Servant, the Wounded Healer, the Suffering Savior?

Who is the Healing Servant?

There has been a long debate about the identity of the servant in this and the other servant poems. Some suggest that the Suffering Servant is a prophet like Jeremiah or the prophets as a group. Others think it is Israel who suffered in exile (Israel is called “my servant” in Isa 44:1), or a core known as the faithful remnant. Still others point immediately to the figure of Jesus, since in the Gospel of Matthew a number of links are made between Jesus and the Suffering Servant (e.g., Mt 8:17).

It is also reasonable to argue that the figure of the Healing Servant refers to a model of the way God operates, the way of bringing healing through a suffering individual, group or community whom God has chosen as an agent of healing. One such group or person existed among God’s ancient people. Groups willing to effect reconciliation by walking the way of suffering with the oppressed exist today. Ultimately, it is God in person, incarnate

The response of creation

God who announces the coming of justice and healing to earth and to the nations, is identified as the one who stretched out the skies like a tent and prepared earth for life to emerge (verse 5). This is the celebrating the Creator we will meet in the Bible study on Psalm 104.

The new and remarkable thing that God is doing (verse 9), effecting healing and liberation through a Suffering Servant, will be acclaimed by all creation. The seas and all their living creatures, the deserts and their inhabitants, the isles and the very ends of the earth are all summoned to praise the Creator/Healer/Liberator God. (Note the link here with the Village Group on the “Healing Creation”) The Healing Servant comes not only to reconcile peoples, but to reconcile humans to a wounded creation. The cry of creation is also a response to its own healing.

Norman Habel

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In our worship life, how should we highlight the process of the servant Christ healing lives, peoples and creation? How do you join with creation in celebrating the living presence of the Healing Servant?



Revelation 7:9–17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7 is a wonderful interlude of salvation between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. The plagues of God's judgment in the trumpets and bowls sequences still lie ahead, echoing the plagues of the Exodus story. Yet, even through the most difficult sections of Revelation, God's judgment is not unrelenting. Chapter 7 interrupts the seal sequence to assure us of the protection and salvation of the people of God.¹ This interlude also builds suspense before the seventh seal is opened.

Much of the book of Revelation recalls the Exodus story. In Revelation, God's people are called to undertake a dramatic new Exodus, "not in Egypt but in the heart of the Roman Empire."² Chapter 7 envisions our journey from the wilderness of tribulation into the promised land of God's sheltering presence. Links to the Exodus in this chapter include the Lamb's blood which saves us; the sealing of God's saints (Rev 7:3), similar to the sealing of the Israelites' doorposts with the blood of the Lamb to protect them from the angel of death in Exodus 12; and, the washing of robes, similar to the washing of robes before meeting God on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:4, 10). Palm branches in the hands of the worshipers are both a sign of victory (1 Macc 13:51) and an allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles, a further Exodus link (Lev 23:40–43).³ Jesus, the shepherding Lamb, takes the role of God's new Moses in Revelation, leading us into freedom. What other echoes from the Exodus do you hear in Revelation? How does the call to exodus ("come out," Rev 18:4) continue to lead the church today?

From every nation, tribe, people, language

This scene from Revelation 7 divides into two sections, the vision ("I saw," Rev 7:9–12) and its interpretation (the explanation by "one of the elders," Rev 7:13–17). Worship and praise are central to the scene, as to the entire book of Revelation.

Gathered around the throne of God, John sees a multicultural multitude "from every nation, all tribes, peoples, languages." This phrase and variations on it occur seven times in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). Look back at the first reference in Revelation 5:9, a song of praise to the Lamb who has ransomed people from every culture and nation.

The Cuban scholar, Justo Gonzalez, likens Revelation's multicultural perspective to *mestizo* literature, addressed to people of a "mixed" cultural heritage today.⁴ We do not know details about the cultural identity of John, the author of Revelation. (He was not the same John as the author of the Gospel of John.) Writing in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), the author may have been a recent refugee from Palestine after the brutal Roman reconquest of that land, following the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE. He wrote in Greek, a language that most of his audience would understand, even though Greek may not have been his or his readers' first language. John was highly critical of Roman culture and of accommodation to the culture by some Christians in Asia Minor.

"Salvation is to God and to the Lamb"

The multicultural multitude proclaims that salvation belongs to God. "Salvation" in the ancient world was not just a spiritual term, but also a political claim of the empire. Beginning with Emperor Caesar Augustus, Roman coins and propaganda referred to the emperor as

Can you identify with life in a *mestizo* (mixed culture) situation? What is your cultural location? Are you reading this Bible study in your first language? How might Revelation speak to issues of immigrants and refugees fleeing trauma in our world today?

“savior” and advertised “salvation” as something achieved through military victory. To these political claims of salvation Revelation says a bold “no,” countering with its own alternative vision of salvation and power as belonging only to God and to the Lamb.

Worship God “forever and ever! Amen!”

All heaven now breaks loose with “Amen” and doxologies, singing praise to God. The hymns of Revelation are familiar to Christians—from Handel’s “Messiah” with its “Halleluia Chorus” and “Worthy Is the Lamb” to hymns such as “Holy, holy, holy.” No other book of the Bible has so influenced Christian liturgy or music. The entire book of Revelation is framed in liturgy, from its opening “on the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10) to the closing eucharistic dialogue (Rev 22:17). Songs in heaven anticipate God’s future, giving hope and direction to God’s people on earth. Worship is central to Revelation, a fact sometimes missed by those who view the book as focused on apocalyptic predictions and timetables.

Those who have come out of “tribulation”

An elder interprets the vision in a typical apocalyptic question-and-answer format. Only a few visions in Revelation receive an explanation by an interpreter (*cf.* Rev 17), underscoring the importance of Revelation 7.

The elder identifies the multicultural multitude as those who have “come out of the great *thlipsis* (“tribulation”). The Greek word *thlipsis*, which recurs throughout Revelation, is key to understanding the historical situation of John and his communities (Rev 1:9). Apocalyptic literature is often the literature of marginalized or oppressed people. Most scholars think that the tribulation experi-

How do you picture “salvation”? To what false claims of salvation is the church called to say a bold “no” today?

enced by Revelation’s audience was not outright persecution or death, but rather acute marginalization and exclusion. Perhaps they were unable to “buy and sell” (Rev 13:17) or to participate in other aspects of life because they refused to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:20) or to offer sacrifice to the emperor (Rev 14:9–11).

What does *thlipsis* mean for God’s people today? Chilean scholar Pablo Richard draws a parallel between how people today are left behind by the global economy and the situation of Christians in Revelation.⁵

What hymns and liturgies from Revelation do you like to sing? How do worship and liturgy give hope and direction to your life on earth?

In a paradoxical combination of colors and imagery, the multicultural multitude washed their robes in the Lamb’s blood and thereby “made them white” (Rev 7:14). This may be a reference to the washing from sin commanded in Isaiah 1:16–18 (“though your sins are like scarlet they shall be like snow”) or perhaps a reversal of the logic of purification after the Holy War in Numbers 31:19–20.⁶

The shepherding Lamb, God’s sheltering presence

In even more paradoxical imagery, the Lamb is both lamb and shepherd of the flock, tending and leading people to springs of living water. God tenderly

Do you feel that today’s situation of exclusion under economic globalization is parallel to the situation addressed in Revelation? What other forms of exclusion in our world today does Revelation’s vision address?

How does the image of Jesus as a shepherding Lamb speak to you? What tears does God wipe away for you? How have you experienced God's sheltering presence?

cares for us and “shelters” (*skene*) us. The verb “shelter” evokes tabernacle imagery, the sense of God's radiant presence or dwelling (see Ezek 37:27) as a canopy or tent over us. God dwells in and with creation and desires to wipe away all its tears. This image recalls Isaiah 25:8, one of the many Old Testament allusions in Revelation.

God's people “will not hunger or thirst” on their journey through the wilderness, nor will any scorching wind or sun touch them (in contrast to the sun's scorching of evil-doers in Rev 16:7). Verse 16 is the longest of Revelation's hundreds of Old Testament allusions, drawn from Isaiah 49:10. For Isaiah it was a call to return home from exile. For Revelation the promise is that God's people will come through the tribulation, led by their Shepherd-Lamb, into God's new land.

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Notes

¹ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), pp. 65–69.

² Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 77.

³ See Hakan Ulfsgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles* (Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989).

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 59.

⁵ Richard, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 23.

⁶ See Wesley Howard Brook and Anthony Gwyer, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 210: Revelation is not concerned that the enemy's blood must be removed to achieve purity, as in Numbers 31:19–20, but rather declares that sharing in the Lamb's blood itself generates purity.



Day 3:

Forgive and Heal

Genesis 50:15–21

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Forgiveness is not just some nebulous vague idea that one can easily dismiss. It has to do with uniting people through practical politics. Without forgiveness there is no future.

These are the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, for whom the power of forgiveness was a central force in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is the story of how the deep rift between them is healed. It is also a story about the power of forgiveness in both a personal and a political context. The question this story raises is, How does forgiveness heal the rift between Joseph and his brothers?

When the father dies

The context of this episode is the death of the father, Jacob. Before Jacob dies he blesses each one of his sons. His dying wish is to be buried with his ancestors in the cave in the field of Machpelah in Canaan (Gen 49:29–33).

Joseph's close bond with his father is reflected in the fact that Joseph "threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him" (Gen 50:1). Joseph disregards the idea that the body may be unclean or that people might consider this Egyptian ruler weak if he weeps in public. Joseph loves his father deeply, a fact that is not lost on Joseph's brothers.

A common feature of death scenes is a reconciliation between a father and his children. Given the long history of broken relations between Jacob and his sons, we might have expected that Jacob would have called his sons together to make peace with them. Instead, he blesses each son with words that correspond to their character, a

character that will determine their future. The tensions between Joseph and his brothers remains unresolved at the father's death bed.

At the funeral

When families are torn apart, funerals can be painful. Family members may be nice to each other for the sake of the deceased. Jacob's funeral was a national event. Joseph provided for his father a period of mourning, and a funeral procession fitting for an Egyptian leader. Joseph is clearly in charge, even though he is not the oldest son. The funeral is a display of his political authority in Egypt.

After the body was embalmed, and the forty days of mourning observed, Joseph led a massive procession of Egyptian leaders, including their chariots and the entire extended family of Jacob (less the children), back to Canaan for the burial (Gen 50:1–14). And, as the writer notes, the Canaanites were duly impressed by this grand Egyptian funeral in their midst. Joseph had made his father proud.

What appears to be the brothers' role in this grand affair?

After the funeral

Once the funeral is over and the family returns home, the brothers recognize only too well their new reality.

What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him? (Gen 50:15).

Does Jacob contribute to the conflict between Joseph and his brothers? If so, how? How do children feel about each other when a parent loves one more than others and gives them a greater inheritance?

Bearing a grudge: the verb for “bearing a grudge” does not occur often in Hebrew. It appears in one significant passage that may be connected with this text. Esau “held a grudge” against Jacob because Isaac had given Jacob the blessing. Esau says that he will wait until the days of mourning for his father are over, and then will kill his brother Jacob (Gen 27:41). To “hold a grudge” means to harbor deep animosity, so deep it can lead to murder. For the brothers, that same scenario is possible. Their family tradition would suggest that the situation is really serious, even though Joseph had assured them of his love and concern when his identity was first revealed to his brothers (Gen 45:1–15).

The scheme

The brothers devise a scheme to deceive Joseph and to protect themselves. In doing this, they are following in the footsteps of their father Jacob, a notorious trickster. In fact, his name “Jacob” means one who deceives or plays devious tricks.

The scheme involves creating a death-bed speech for Jacob—a speech which the loving son, Joseph, could be expected to honor—and having it delivered to Joseph. That speech, devised in fear and deceit, is laden with importance.

“Say to Joseph: ‘I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him (Gen 50:17).

Is this a confession of guilt? Do the brothers act out of a sense of repentance for their misdeeds? Or, is their motive still one of fear and self-preservation?

In formulating this speech, the brothers acknowledge the wrong they have done—a crime or an act of rebellion. In Hebrew this was an evil deed, a sin that caused harm.

Notice the careful wording of the final line. The brothers identify themselves as servants of the God of Jacob, Joseph’s father. The brothers are playing on Joseph’s personal and spiritual bond with his father. They are using language designed to win Joseph’s favor.

What do these tears mean? Are the tears of Joseph a prelude to rage? A man distraught by what his brothers have done? Does Joseph see through the scheming of his brothers? Is there any hint that the brothers are finally sorry for their sins? Or, are they only trying to “save their skins”?

The tears

Joseph responds, once again, by bursting into tears. The painful weeping that occurred when the father died is repeated. Joseph is distraught. In response the brothers also burst into tears and reply, “We are here as your servants.” They “fall down” before Joseph as they did in the very dream that once provoked their anger against Joseph (Gen 37:9–11).

This is the moment where we might stop the story, and ask the listener to predict what would happen next. The story could take one of several directions.

The healing word

Joseph’s reply is extraordinary. It reflects the heart of a person who heals through forgiveness. Consider the process of healing in what follows:

First, Joseph says twice, “Do not be afraid.” Joseph is no fool. He sees through their scheming and reaches back to the motive for what they have just done—out of fear! He does not publicly expose their trickery and deceit. He deals with a

deeper problem—their insecurity and fear. So the first phase of his healing word is assurance, dealing with their inner fears.

Second, Joseph asks the rhetorical question, “Am I in the place of God?” Ironically, Joseph could have said, “yes.” As an Egyptian ruler he could be viewed as a ruler in the place of an Egyptian deity and could pronounce judgement on the brothers as a judgement from God. Instead, he chooses to identify himself as a human being like others. Joseph is a man and leaves judgement to God. Another phase of healing is identifying with those in need, being human and not playing God.

Third, Joseph reads the history of their relationships from a gospel perspective. He refuses to allow their wrongs to be determinative. Joseph does not retaliate, answering one wrong with another. Joseph does not see justice as retribution or punishment. Instead, he discerns that behind their limited human ways, God is at work. What they planned for evil God turned into good: the preservation of a people. The goodness and love of God works in our lives even when they are broken and destructive. A third facet of healing is to discern the hand of God in our lives “working together for good.”

Fourth, Joseph demonstrates his forgiveness in more than words. He again assures his brothers that they and their families will have all the provisions they need to live in Egypt. Here there is no animosity, only reassurance. By these actions Joseph’s forgiveness also involves practical politics, giving security to this family of aliens in Egypt.

Fifth, the comment of the storyteller summarizes the force of Joseph’s forgiveness. Literally the text reads, “he [Joseph] has compassion (*nacham*) on them and speaks to their heart.” “So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen 50:21). In this way, he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Nacham: In one form this verb describes someone who is “sorry” for his/her deeds and “grieves” over what has happened. In another form, it indicates compassion or empathy when another person is in pain. In this story, we might expect the brothers to grieve for their sins. Instead, it is Joseph who grieves. Joseph has empathy—a grieving compassion—even if his brothers seem to remain fearful. In the end, Joseph speaks “to their heart.” Joseph’s forgiveness is total. He reaches out with compassion to bring healing to the family.

For further discussion

It is generally assumed that forgiveness is to be preceded by repentance. We pronounce forgiveness of sins in church after confession. In real life, however, forgiveness may not necessarily precede grief and sorrow over sin. Sometimes forgiveness on the part of the injured party evokes repentance. Sometimes it is the word of love, or “speaking to the heart,” rather than the threat of the law that evokes repentance and leads to healing.

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Describe situations or events in your life where the word of forgiveness had the power to heal and restore relations even when the guilty party did not admit to being wrong. Recount other episodes where the power of forgiveness was part of the process of healing. How does this differ from the common Lutheran understanding that the law convicts us of our sin and the gospel extends the word of forgiveness from Christ? Is there a sense that God has offered forgiveness before we repent?



Luke 7:36–50

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Forgiveness that heals

A woman is crashing a stylish party. She is not just any woman but is seen as “a sinner.” It is likely that she was a prostitute, a well-known local whore. Jesus is at the party, being entertained by a Pharisee. Pharisees were concerned about proper conduct at meals, and the woman is spoiling the banquet! She is making a public spectacle of herself and also putting Jesus to a test.

According to standards of propriety, Jesus had no choice but to reject the woman, or at least, protect himself from being touched by her. After all, couldn't he perceive what kind of woman she was? But Jesus submits to her touch, while he suggests to his host that he reads his thoughts. Indirectly this also means that Jesus is well aware of the kind of woman this is. But instead of keeping her at a decent distance, he distances himself from the Pharisee at whose table he reclines.

The narrative makes a sharp contrast between the sinful woman who appears as an uninvited and unwanted guest, and the host of the banquet who is a respected man in society. The host has invited Jesus to such a grand meal that they actually lie at the table. Neither of the two is initially named. The point is this huge discrepancy in status, made clear from the beginning.

A similar story is told in the other Gospels. There Jesus is anointed by a woman at the beginning of the Passion narrative, and according to Mark and Matthew, she is commended by Jesus who declares, “what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mt 26:13). In the Gospel of John she is said to be Mary of Bethany. In later tradition these stories were all merged, and the

“sinful” woman with a jar of ointment was identified as Mary of Magdalene. Luke, however, leaves her nameless.

While in the other accounts the anointing occurs in anticipation of Jesus' death, the story in Luke 7 is about Jesus who offers divine forgiveness in response to love. But isn't love an effect of forgiveness? Isn't forgiveness God's free gift, God's loving embrace of sinners, especially those who repent? Can the woman's desperate action and tears be anything but signs of repentance?

There is an embarrassing ambiguity in this story that is not easily resolved—if at all. Many interpreters have tried to come to terms with the lack of consistency by distinguishing between several layers of tradition in the present story. The different positions are assigned to different layers, the latter commenting on and correcting the earlier. That is why the parable introduced into Jesus' speech in verses 41–43 does not fit the story; in fact, it misinterprets rather than interprets it. In the end, Jesus seems to go against himself.

In verse 47, Jesus explains the woman's lavish love as a sign of forgiveness. Translations of the first part of this verse tend to seek consistency with the parable and the latter part of verse 47: “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” This supports the understanding that her love follows Jesus forgiveness, or is released by it. However, the Greek is ambiguous and may equally well mean: “Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much.” This is contrary to the parable and the last words of verse 47: “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” It indicates that Jesus' forgiveness is a response to her love. This, in fact, concurs with the flow of the narrative. Only in the end, after she prostrates herself in love, is forgiveness proclaimed.

The ambiguity is inherent in the story as we have it. A unifying perspective is the

How do you view the relationship between human love and God's forgiveness?

power Jesus has “even to forgive sins” (verses 48–49). But are there requirements attached? Jesus’ little treatise to Simon, his Pharisee host, appears to explain this. It also shows that Jesus knows what is hidden. He demonstrates his prophetic ability, not by dismissing the woman, but by letting his Pharisee host understand that he can read his thoughts. Jesus tells him a parable. It is simple and reflects the cruel realities of life where people were easily trapped into increasing cycles of debt. The twist of the parable is the unthinkable cancellation of debts of those unable to pay. However, the point of comparison is not the cancellation, but what follows. Forgiveness is a healing force; it generates love. The more that is forgiven the greater the love.

The application ought to be clear: since the woman is a sinner, she has been forgiven more and loves Jesus more than those, including the Pharisee, whose lives seem to be proper and blameless. Their need for forgiveness is less, and accordingly they love less. So far, so good. However, the logic also requires that the woman was forgiven before she appears with her excessive gifts and act of love. This has lead many interpreters to assume a previous encounter between Jesus and the woman where her many sins were forgiven, her great debt cancelled. In other words, the story is completely turned round. The concluding words do not come at the end, but were said before in a story not told. But there is nothing in the larger narrative to suggest they had met before. So what is wrong with the logic Jesus commends? What makes it sound as if Simon in judging correctly is actually condemning himself? The parable ought to have cleared him.

Jesus continues by contrasting the behavior of the sinful woman and the Pharisee. The balance is very much in her favor. Her dramatic and costly action is interpreted as an expression of love.

Her weeping could be a sign of repentance, of joy, or of devotion. If we assume that we know which it is, we violate the silence of the story itself. Her actions are not to satisfy a basic need for sustenance. Both in terms of her means and ways, her service is excessive; it has a character of surplus.

Whereas in the other accounts it is Jesus’ disciples who complain about the waste involved, there is no trace of such a reaction in Luke. The woman outdoes the Pharisee’s party, and Jesus turns her action into a criticism of the Pharisee host. It is irrelevant to ask whether Jesus’ complaints concern expectable acts of hospitality. The point is that this prostitute and party-crasher acts in such a way that the Pharisee is put to shame on his own premises. His lack of love has been exposed through her shower of great love.

Discuss examples from your setting of encounters similar to that of the woman and the Pharisee. How is Jesus active in the midst of them?

Jesus’ concluding words of forgiveness are spoken to the woman directly. For the first time she is not just the cause or topic of the men’s conversation. She herself speaks only through her deeds. Jesus’ final words resonate with the healing stories. In these stories women neither lay claims, nor do they fight their way through. They seem to respect the rules of propriety, and are helped because Jesus himself takes the initiative.

This “sinful” woman, who anoints Jesus in sovereign disdain of all norms for respectable conduct, is a remarkable exception. She may not utter a word throughout the story, yet she is the one who initiates whatever follows among the men and between her and Jesus. In all her humbleness, she makes a point of herself. That is why this story may be

included among what we could call “the wrestling stories” in the Bible. They tell us that sometimes people fight and argue with God, and God gives in, even seems to be overcome by them. The famous example is Jacob who wrestles with God through the night and does not let go until he is blessed. In the Gospel of Mark the Syrophoenician woman wins an argument with Jesus, and her daughter is healed. Finally, there is this sinful woman who by her lavish act of

love puts the Pharisee to shame and is forgiven.

“Do you see this woman?”

To her Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.” Her love is interpreted as an expression of faith, of the conviction that Jesus may heal, and that in his forgiveness there is salvation.

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Day 4: **Reorder Power**

Ruth 4:13–17

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

We are familiar with the words of Psalm 23:1–3

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

When the Lord restores the soul, a person is made whole. To restore the soul means to restore life, to make whole, to heal. Come, explore how Ruth provides the means to “restore the soul” of Naomi and thereby heal a family in Israel. Or does she achieve even more? As you read keep asking the question, How is a broken family healed?

Ruth and the refugee family

Before analyzing this text, we need to consider the wider context of the story of Ruth. In the first chapter, Naomi and Elimelech leave their home because of extreme famine; they become refugees in the land of the Moabites. In Deuteronomy the advice is given: “You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live” (Deut 23:6). Yet, it is precisely these despised Moabites who receive the family of Naomi and Elimelech. Ironically, today the distant descendants of the Moabites are Arabs.

What happens to these Israelite refugees in Moab? They are apparently welcomed, marry their two sons to two Moabite women and make Moab their home. It is only when Naomi’s husband and her two sons die that she returns to her original home in Bethlehem.

Naomi is a broken woman. She has no children. There is no future for her or

her family. She is deeply depressed, or in biblical terms, she is bitter. She believes the hand of the Lord is against her. When she returns to Bethlehem she cries, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20).

Two women

One of the features that make this Bible story unusual is that the two main characters are both women. Their relationship is crucial for the future of a family that is central to the hope of Israel.

At the heart of what we call family is attachment or bonding. The child’s attachment to the mother commences in the womb. With that attachment a family is born. In the story of Ruth, Ruth’s extraordinary attachment to Naomi creates a family of two women. Ruth’s attachment to Naomi is total—she declares her commitment to Naomi’s house, people and God. Ruth “cleaves” to her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:14). Ruth begins the process of healing by an attachment that binds her to Naomi as mother. It is the daughter-in-law rather than the mother-in-law who adopts. Ruth’s words are amazing: “where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). How do you think this family of two women would be viewed in a patriarchal society where the father’s house is the normative family? What do you think this author is seeking to emphasize by focusing on this alternative model?

The two women live together in their poverty, the repatriate widow and the alien daughter. Ruth gleans in the field and meets the old man Boaz who shows her special favors, even though she is a foreigner in the field. Naomi, who knows that Boaz is a close relative, monitors the development and proposes a plan to bring Boaz and Ruth even closer together. Then follows the famous thresh-

At this point in the story, how can Naomi be restored to health? Can her broken family be healed? What hope is there for a depressed, poor, childless, repatriate widow in your society?

ing floor scene where Boaz wakes after a night of harvest festivities to find a woman at his feet.

The redeemer

When Boaz awakens in the dark of night and discovers a woman in the straw with him he asks who she is, and she replies: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (Ruth 3:9).

The outcome of this encounter is that Boaz promises by Yahweh the living God, that he will act as a redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, but must first deal with the problem that there is another closer relative who has priority to perform the role of redeemer.

Is Ruth but a pawn in Naomi's plans to find someone to marry Ruth and eventually to have a family? Or is Ruth the daughter who effects healing in a broken family? (*cf.* Gen 38)

The role of redeemer (*go'el*) is played by the man who is nearest of kin. The redeemer has the right under Israelite law to recover the forfeited property of a kinsman (Lev 25:25), or to purchase his freedom if he has fallen into slavery (Lev 25:47–49). The verb *ga'al* also comes to mean “redeem” in the more general sense of deliver or rescue. God delivers Israel from Egypt (Ex 6:6). The term redeemer is a favorite term for God in Isaiah (Isa 44:24). Yahweh is next-of-kin to the people adopted as Yahweh's family.

At the city gate, Boaz follows the necessary legal steps to act as redeemer for Naomi, who now makes her land available for purchase. It must be purchased by a next-of-kin to keep it in the family. The only catch is that whoever buys property must also marry Ruth, the wife of the dead relative, and thereby keep the land in the original family inherit-

ance. The closer relative declines, however, and Boaz is free to marry Ruth.

The blessing of the elders highlights further the role that Ruth is to play. They pray that she will be like Rachel and Leah, the two illustrious mothers of Israel. She will “build up” the house of Israel. She is to be the means of making the house of Boaz like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah (Ruth 4:11–12). Ruth, like Tamar (Gen 38), found an unconventional way of redeeming a family and building a house.

Should Ruth, like Tamar (*cf.* Gen 38:26), be declared “more righteous” than those who took advantage of her?

Ruth and her child

In the key text for this study (Ruth 4:13–17), Boaz marries Ruth who conceives and has a son. It is at this point that we meet a series of surprises in the text. As soon as the child is born the women of the village pronounce a blessing—not for Ruth but for Naomi! Naomi remains the mother of the family. They bless Yahweh because Yahweh has provided Naomi with a redeemer (next-of-kin). But the redeemer they have in mind is not Boaz who redeemed the land and married Ruth. The redeemer is Ruth's child. Ruth has provided the redeemer for the family!

The second surprise is that this child will “restore the soul” of Naomi. This gift of Ruth's means not only a redeemer for the family but the healing of Naomi. Naomi will have her soul restored; she will be healed and become whole again. She will have family, progeny and hope. Her bitterness and depression disappear. The women declare that Ruth is worth more than seven sons precisely because she has given Naomi a son.

The third surprise is that Naomi becomes the mother. Ruth does not nurse the baby on Naomi's behalf, as Moses' mother did for Pharaoh's daughter (Ex

2:7–9). Naomi takes the child and nurses it. This action may seem surprising to some of us. In some places in the world, however, women may be found nursing their grandchildren when their daughters die.

The fourth surprise is that the women of the village publicly declare, “A son has been born to Naomi.” The child is publicly identified as Naomi’s son. And the same group of women name the child. The child also belongs to them, not to the foreigner Ruth. The child restores the community and Ruth to the community.

For further discussion

- Which of Ruth’s actions suggest ways in which she provides a model for healing a family, a community or a relationship?
- How does she achieve restoration in a patriarchal community where the power is with the men?
- Is she but a pawn in the hands of Naomi who eventually gets what she wants, a son rather than a daughter?
- Or, are there indications in this text that the writer is challenging the patriarchal world?
- Is Ruth, the healer, also a model of resistance against a rigid social system?
- A second area of debate relates to the role of Ruth as a foreigner. Is she a model immigrant designed to show how people should convert to Jewish faith and custom? Is she really accepted?
- The story ends with Naomi being restored and Ruth being deprived and silent. Or is she?
- Perhaps we can also ask whether, in spite of all the talk of redeemers—namely, Boaz, another male relative and finally the son—it is really Ruth who is the redeemer?
- Does she not provide the means to redeem, restore, or heal the family line?
- Is Ruth, the Moabite, the true redeemer in Israel?

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Luke 20:45–21:6

⁴⁵ In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation ^{21:1} He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” ⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The widow's challenge

In the Gospel according to Luke, there is strong and unflinching advocacy for the poor. This occurs primarily by addressing, appealing to and confronting the rich, and calling them to conversion. The story about “the widow’s mite” must be read from this perspective: it is addressed to the rich and not to the poor.

Why should Jesus commend a poor widow for putting in the temple treasury all she had to live on? Does that not reinforce injustice, when the call should be for justice and a fair redistribution of goods?

This brief episode resonates with other stories about widows in Luke, as well as with stories where actions by women serve to correct the established religious leadership. Such women are critical examples over and against those with power and prestige whose acts betray what they pretend to be. The widow who places the whole of her livelihood at the disposal of the temple treasury is such a counter-image.

Some interpreters have wanted to ease the moral dilemma of this story by not reading it in exemplary terms at all. They see the thrust of the story as lament rather than praise of the widow. It is a complaint and accusation against those who have led her astray by false pretensions of piety. According to this interpretation Jesus first attacks the scribes in Luke 20:47 for their economic encroachments upon widows. The narrative in Luke 21:1–4 is a condemnation of the temple authorities, who also deprive a widow of her living, although more subtly. She simply does as she has been wrongly taught. The story provides an illustration of the ills of such official devotion.

Reflect on situations similar to this in your context today.

This is a tempting interpretation. It allocates the blame where it ought to be—on corrupt leaders. It restores the copper coins to the widow who has been seduced to give up what she ought to have kept. She is not exemplary. She is to be pitied as much as her oppressors are to be held responsible. But this interpretation is mistaken because it denies any responsibility of her own. Her whole identity remains that of a victim.

However, Jesus’ denouncement of the scribes in Luke 20:47 is connected with this story about the widow. The present division of the text into chapters, which was not there originally, keeps apart what ought to be kept together. In Luke 20:47 the scribes are reproached for their hypocrisy. Together with the chief priests and the wealthy non-priestly aristocracy, they have replaced the Pharisees as Jesus’ antagonists, now that he is in Jerusalem. Jesus harshly claims that the scribes make the most of their status, dressing to be seen, enjoying respectful greetings as they walk in public, and occupying the front seats at worship and meals. Their greed is so excessive that they “devour widows’ houses.” They also flaunt their long prayers; their piety is an item of display.

If the two actions of which the scribes are accused in Luke 20:47 (devouring widows’ houses and long prayers) are meant to be connected with each other, then more than hypocrisy is at stake. Luke 20:47b is more than merely an accusation of hypocrisy. The scribes are condemned because they extort from the widows under the pretext of performing long, probably well-paid, prayers for them. They pretend to serve those whom they exploit. In the context of Luke, such an accusation assumes a strong note of irony since widows elsewhere are portrayed as models who persevere in prayer. The widow prophet Anna never leaves the temple, but worships there by fasting and praying night and day (Lk 2:36–38). Simi-

larly, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18:1–8) is about the need to pray always and never to lose heart.

Widows play a greater role in Luke than in any other New Testament book. “Widow” has the traditional connotations of devastation, poverty and vulnerability. Nevertheless, they are the focus of more than care and compassion. They seem to be a respected group, always portrayed in a positive light. They transcend the roles of victims and receivers and act in such a way that they become prominent examples of faith and piety. The apparently weak and exposed persons, who normally are considered victims, are the ones who act out of full strength of faith.

The story about the widow at the temple treasury is found also in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 12:41–44). Compared to Mark, Luke draws the contrast between the rich and the poor widow with far greater sharpness by omitting the contributions of “the crowd.” Nor does he follow Mark in saying that “many rich people put in large sums.” In Luke’s version the rich are not necessarily generous. Luke does, however, add that the widow was poor.

Thus the widow is contrasted with the hypocritical scribes and their snobbish greed. She also is a counter-image to the rich, who merely give an amount that they will hardly notice. She serves as a critical, devastating critique of the rich, who give

Is the widow at the temple treasury an exception? Or is the irony that the poor widow, victim of the scribes’ mismanagement, is presented as a true paragon of piety? How does she expose the shortcomings of the rich and greedy right in front of the temple?

larger amounts than she does, but in relative terms, far less. The widow acts in an exemplary manner. Through her radical act of abandonment, she exposes their lack of self-sacrificing generosity.

Thus the main point is not in evaluating the widow’s act but in how her act relates to that of others. She serves a critical function in relation to a religious and social leadership that fails to do what it should. Her action makes **their** mismanagement and omissions strikingly clear. The fact that the widow is poor increases the contrast, and gives her example all the more strength. At the same time, her gift of abandonment shows that she courageously and drastically trusts in God alone. The widow exhausts herself and her resources, thereby expressing the strong *kenotic* dimension in Christianity: those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Lk 17:33). Life is gained by giving it up. Yes, also the temple, the center of divinely ordained power, will crumble.

Turid Karlsen Seim

Why is it harder for those in power (or who are rich) than for those with less prestige (or who are poor) to lose? What reordering of power does it imply? What are its implications for the exercise of power in the Lutheran communion?





Day 5: **Heal our Divisions**

Ephesians 2:13–22

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far-off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far-off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them (Isa 57:19).

Ephesians 2 is a wonderful text about reconciliation that draws on Isaiah 57:19 to proclaim peace. Written to address the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, it sings also of the cosmic reconciliation of the entire world. As we consider the healing of divisions today, Ephesians offers a prototype in the healing and reconciliation that Christ effected on the cross. Such healing is part of God's "economy" (*oikonomia*) or plan, to "gather up into one" all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Eph 1:10).

The whole letter may be a baptismal homily, underscoring strong contrasts between our previous life and our new life in Christ through baptism. Spatially, the contrast is between "far-off" and "near." Temporally, the contrast is between "once" and "but now." The language of the early chapters of Ephesians is doxological, giving thanks to God in prayer. It is as if the author of this letter, in reflecting on Christ, cannot help but break into song or prayer.

Bringing "near" those who were once "far-off"

What are the divisions that need healing today? What ethnic and other walls separate people from God and from one another? (see the Village Group chapter on "Removing Barriers that Exclude")

Christ goes out to seek those of us "who were once far-off" in order to bring us near. In the context of Ephesians, the people who are "far-off" are the Gentiles—that is, we ourselves. As you read, try reversing the language of "we" and

Have you ever felt far-off from God? How did God bring you near? Who are those in our world today who are being "brought near" by God?

"you" in order to hear the full impact of reconciliation. We Gentiles are those who once were separated from God, having no place in the commonwealth of Israel; we are the ones who were "strangers to God's covenants of promise" (Eph 2:12). But now we who were far-off have become fellow citizens in Christ, full members of God's household.

The word for "far-off" (*makran*), repeated twice in this passage (Eph 2:13,17), is the same word as in the story of the Prodigal Son: the father runs out to embrace his son when he is still "far-off" (Lk 15:20). While we Gentiles were still far-off, Christ "went out to us" to proclaim the good news. Ephesians proclaims Christ's reconciling embrace in welcoming us home to God, just as the father welcomed home the son.

A hymn to Christ?

A number of scholars suggest that verses 14–16 (or 14–18) were originally an early Christian hymn about Christ and about his work of reconciling opposites. The context of the hymn may have been baptism, reminding both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians of their radical change of status. If this text is a hymn, its character as shared song may open up possibilities for reconciliation today. Singing and music can sometimes heal divisions and bring people together even when differences seem irreconcilable.

This hymn may also be modeled on Colossians, a letter probably written one decade earlier. Compare Ephesians 2:14–16 and Colossians 1:15–20. Themes common to both hymns include cosmic reconciliation and peace. What other similarities do you see in the descriptions of Christ?

Christ is our peace

The word “peace” forms the core of the Ephesians’ hymn, occurring three times (verses 14, 15, 17). Many biblical texts proclaim peace, but Ephesians makes a daring theological claim: Christ himself **is** our peace. Not only does Christ make peace, he himself becomes peace, in his own body—in his blood on the cross—reconciling people to God and to one another.

The other references to peace in Ephesians—the calls to be peacemakers and to put on the armor of peace (Eph 4:3, 6:15, 23)—are rooted in this proclamation of verse 14 that it is Christ himself who is our peace. Because of Christ, the church is called to peacemaking work in the world. In verse 17, the word for “preaching” peace is actually “evangelizing” peace. Evangelism must include working to overcome violence and to make peace where it seems impossible. The church’s initiative for peacemaking comes not from ourselves, but from Christ.

Christ’s peace “makes us both one,” creating one new humanity. The combination of the words “create” and “human” (*anthropos*) echoes the Genesis creation story. Ephesians’ vision of oneness is bigger than the church, encompassing a unity that embraces the reconciliation of the whole human family. Indeed, the word “church” is not mentioned in this text. A “new humanity” is proclaimed, the mystical reconciliation of long-divided peoples.

Christ preached “peace to those who are far-off and peace to those who are near.” Read Isaiah 57:19, the text from which this image is taken. In Isaiah the far-off ones were God’s people still in exile, while the near ones were those who had stayed behind on the land. Both groups receive the promise of the healing of the world, God’s assurance that “I will heal them.”

How is your church involved in peacemaking? How does the vision of Christ as our peace inspire commitments to overcome violence? (see Village Group chapter on “Overcoming Violence”)

Dividing walls

Christ made peace by destroying the dividing wall of hostility, the enmity that exists among people and between people and God. It is the “cross” (verse 16, a word probably added into the original hymn) that brings enmity to an end. The “wall” image in verse 14 may have referred originally to the temple wall that separated the court of Gentiles from the inner sanctuary; now it refers to all the walls that restrict access to God. Similar to the ripping of the temple curtain in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 15:38), through Christ’s death the wall is broken down.

The Berlin Wall may be gone, but our world continues building walls to keep out enemies and to enforce separation. “Gated communities” exclude people of lower economic status from private neighborhoods. Many countries have built fences and walls along their borders. Walls and checkpoints confine thousands of Palestinians, while some Israelis hope to build an even more impenetrable wall. Ephesians 2 was the theme for a recent conference that envisioned an end to the dividing walls separating Palestinians and Israelis.

What are the major dividing walls of hostility in our world today? In your society? How does the cross of Christ break down walls? How have you witnessed enmity between groups of people being overcome?

Reconciliation as full citizenship

Ephesians uses a rich combination of political and household imagery to describe the reconciliation and inclusion

we receive in Christ. We now have “access” to God in one spirit (verse 18; see also Eph 3:12). We, who were once strangers or “aliens” (the Greek word *xenoi*, from which “xenophobia” is derived), now have a commonwealth (*politeia*) in which we are co-citizens (*sym-politai*). These are political terms (note the root word *polis*), expressing a longing for citizenship that is felt even today by many aliens and refugees.

Reconciliation as homecoming

In verse 19 the terminology shifts from political imagery to the more intimate language of “home.” The Greek for house is *oikos*, from which words such as ecu-

menical, economy and ecology are also derived. Ephesians 2 contains a concentration of “*oik*–” words: We are members of the household of God (*oikeoi*, Eph 2:19). The whole house of “structure” (*oikodome*, verse 21) holds together in Christ. We are being “built together” (*syn-oikodomeisthe*) into the “dwelling” or home (*katoiketerion*, verse 22) of God.

The household of God is a wonderful metaphor for the church—allowing space for diversity (rooms in which each person can be themselves) as well as for unity (common spaces).¹ Walls that exclude and divide need to be dismantled, in order to welcome everyone into the structure, built on Christ as its cornerstone.

Barbara Rossing

Describe a place where you have felt completely at “home.” What qualities did it have? How can the church deepen this sense of hospitality and welcome? How can we offer a sense of “home” as a way of healing a divided world?

Notes

¹ So Anne Svenningsen, “God’s Peace,” Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Triennial Convention Bible Study, July 1996 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press), pp. 21–22.



Luke 24:13–35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹ He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They

were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

How is the sharing of stories important in the life of faith?

On the way to where the others are

Two people are on their way to Emmaus. They have left Jerusalem and the others in their group behind.

The Emmaus episode is the story of a journey. The language of mobility, of walking, of moving along, of proceeding, of learning on the road, reflects a fundamental theme in Luke’s writing. The whole outline is one of moving from one place to another, of not just being **on** the way but **being** the way. Such is the Christian self-designation in the Acts of the Apostles: the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

The direction of the movement is never insignificant. In the Emmaus story

the two disciples are on the road, but they are not moving on, following their master. They are leaving the miserable end of their previous commitment behind; they are going back home. Their expectations of the prophet they had chosen to follow had been high. They had eagerly awaited the redeeming moment of victory. They had looked forward to seeing the enemies of their people slain and humiliated. They had hoped for the day of glory—the ultimate manifestation of God’s preferential option for them, God’s people. But reality had defeated them. Their hero of promises had lost his case. If hopes were to survive, they would have to look elsewhere, to start again from square one.

When and where have you experienced similar disappointments?

They are leaving Jerusalem, the place of power and glory that has turned into misery. As they turn toward Emmaus, this is the scream of their return, the hurt of misplaced trust, of no longer knowing what to believe. In fact, the whole gospel story is at an impasse. The male disciples do not believe, even ridicule, the women's tale of the empty tomb. Peter may have been amazed at the empty tomb, but he has gone home, and so do the two who are on their way to Emmaus.

As they search for some sense and reason to it all, they talk together. Luke always has the disciples travel two by two, so that there is a taste of community, so that responsibility is shared, so that reflection does not take place in isolation. In this case, they also welcome a stranger into their conversation. He makes them tell their story. They do so, assuming they possess knowledge he does not have.

The three elements of their story all start with statements which, elsewhere in the New Testament, are positive affirmations of the Christian faith. Here they lead to expressions of utter frustration. The wonderful life of Jesus is punctured by his tragic death. Their hope that he was the one to redeem Israel is replaced by disillusion. The talk of some women that his grave is empty and angels had proclaimed him to be alive, is undermined by the fact that they did not actually see Jesus.

The report of the two carefully reiterates the story as it has just been told in the gospel narrative. This is done for the benefit of the stranger who they assume does not know. For us, as readers, this is mere repetition. Is this only a means of making us wait impatiently for the moment they will understand what we **already** know, that the stranger in fact is Jesus? Or are we being told something that we do not already know?

Their rendering of the morning's events is quite faithful, but it also reveals confusion and a hesitation on their part

Should we sometimes question those whom we are accustomed to trust and believe? How does a story become authoritative for us? What does it take to convince us?

as to who and what to believe. Their re-telling brings out the irony of the story: the two still doubt what the reader knows to be true. It shows how they struggle to transcend their own experience of defeat, by trusting the stories of others whose credibility they have not readily accepted. They ask for more, and in the end it seems that only the recognition of the Lord brings restoration. He is the one verifiable teacher. By his surprise appearance, he lends credibility to those they had been reluctant to trust. There is a lesson here as to how credibility is conceived and authority attained.

The language of the text continually reminds us that there are two "of them." Those whose stories they re-tell and hesitantly discredit belong to the same group. They are still characterized by this shared sense of belonging but they are about to move apart. Each will opt for his or her own destination. As they head for Emmaus, they have left the others behind in Jerusalem.

When they reach Emmaus, they want their fellow travelers to stay with them. They have hardly settled in when their eyes are opened. In recognizing Jesus they are compelled to return to Jerusalem the very same day. The attraction of the Emmaus story has often been its sacramental dimension: in the end, faith is restored in the revealing of the Lord through the breaking of the bread. Thus, every place becomes a place for his presence to be revealed. Yet, the risen Lord does not remain with them beyond this moment of revelation. As he vanishes, they move to join those whom they had left. From Emmaus they find their way back to Jerusalem. The geographical focus of this story is Jerusa-

lem. The road to Emmaus leads to Jerusalem, to where the others are.

In returning to Jerusalem, they are reunited with “the others.” Communion is re-established as they mutually give account. Immediately the two learn that in Jerusalem the risen Lord has appeared also to Simon. They respond by telling their story. In this manner, the Jerusalem story of the Lord appearing to the prominent Simon Peter and the Emmaus story of Jesus’ walk and talk with two otherwise unknown disciples are merged with the story of the women. These stories together become a shared recognition of the resurrection and abiding presence of the crucified Lord.

The impasse is overcome, not because the disciples knew the right direction in which to go, nor because some of them

were “right.” But Jesus found them. He came to them where they were, and in walking along with them, made them aware that they were destined for communion—with him and with each other.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is no further competition among the disciples. There are no more arguments over which of them is the greatest (Lk 9:46–48; 22:24–27). For the remainder of Luke’s Gospel, the Lord appears to the entire community; no one is in a privileged position. Thus, in its entirety, the Emmaus story is about restored faith and restored communion. It is about the sharing of stories and mutual recognition. It is about unity as gift and calling.

Turid Karlsen Seim

What are some implications of this story for how power and privilege often operate in and between churches? Will we allow the recognition of the presence of the Lord to heal the distortion of our disconnected and competing voices? What does this say about disputes regarding who is the greatest? Instead of insisting on our own way and familiar space, can we be moved to go to where the others are?



Day 6: Heal the Land...

Psalm 104:27–31

²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season; ²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. ³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. ³¹ May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—

God, the chef

The context of today's particular text is a Psalm in which God the Creator is celebrating the joys of creation. On a closer reading of verses 27–31, we find God described as the supreme chef preparing food for all of God's creatures. All of creation is portrayed as “waiting” or “hoping” for food from God the chef. Even the lion cubs wait for their food from God (verse 21).

God, in turn, provides food “in due season.” The significance of this truth is that the earth is an ecosystem, a delicately balanced pattern of forces that provide food for every species in every place on earth when needed. “In due season” is a biblical way of describing the ecosystem that God has created for all life on planet earth. Disrupting this system with pesticides or other forces may mean that food supplies are not available “in due season.”

Discuss some examples of how the ecosystem is disrupted, and how this text empowers us to address this.

God's face

Verse 28 declares that God's creatures are terrified if God's face is hidden. Does this simply mean that if God, sitting on some celestial throne above, looks the other way, people panic?

What is meant by the face of God? In some contexts, this can refer to the physical face of a person. In other places it refers to the presence of God extending God's grace and peace (as in the benediction of Num 6:24–26). In this Psalm, God's face is the life-giving presence of God that fills creation. Without

If God's presence is behind all of creation, what are we doing when we pollute creation? What is the implication of destroying species or removing vast rainforests? What happens when we burn the “masks of God” with nuclear explosions or acid rain?

God's “presence” there would be no living creation. God is not located far away but in, with and under creation.

Here “face” is parallel to “glory.” In verse 31, the Psalmist prays that God's glory—God's face—would never disappear. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God's glory is the visible presence of God. This visible presence appeared as a fire cloud on top of Mount Sinai (Ex 24:15–16), filled the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex 40:34), and later filled the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 8:11). Especially important for understanding our text is the cry of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” It is not only the temple, but planet earth that is filled with God's glory or presence.

Luther's understanding of creation is similar. He speaks of the various parts of creation being masks of God (*larvae Dei*). God's face, God's presence, is not high in heaven, but behind all creation, filling earth—if we but have the eyes of faith to see God there.

God, the healer

In this Psalm, God also celebrates new life. According to verse 29, when God removes God's breath, creatures die. If, however, God “sends forth” God's breath—like a personal messenger—creation continues here and now.

The key Hebrew term in verses 29–30 is *ruach*, a word which can be translated as wind, spirit or breath. In verses 3 and 4, this term clearly refers to the winds that blow across the land. In Genesis 6:17, the term refers to the breath or spirit of God that gives life to all creatures (*cf.* Gen 6:3). A significant feature of verse 30 is that *ruach* refers not only to the life breath that brings new life to living creatures, but to the fact that God's Spirit “renews the face of the ground.” God revives more than humans!

The “face of the ground” is an expression found in the early chapters of Genesis. From the study of Genesis 2 recall that ground is *adamah*, the stuff from which all living creatures are made including humans—*adam*. When God sends the flood it blots out all life from the “face of the ground”—that is, from the entire surface of earth.

When God, in this Psalm, “makes new” the face of the ground, it means that God heals what is broken, wounded or battered anywhere on earth. This is a portrait not only of God as a personal creator breathing life into each one of us, but of God the healer, present in creation, continually restoring what has been broken. Thus, God works through creation to renew and restore—to heal—the face of earth.

God and earth

In Western thought, people have tended to view the earth, with its rocks, seas and sands, as inanimate. Humans are living subjects while earth is a lifeless object. Many ecologists have begun to challenge this view. Here, earth is a living thing, a subject that can be healed.

Reading this Psalm from an African perspective, Abotchie Ntreh writes,

Thus it is clear that although everything good comes to humans from God, it is through earth that they are made possible. Our origin, sustenance and ultimate exit depend on Mother Earth.¹

In verse 32, the Psalmist says that earth trembles before God. Earth is called upon to sing to God (Ps 96:1). Earth also celebrates with the Creator. If earth is more than mute mountains and lifeless rocks,

then when God renews the face of the ground, God is healing a living entity. Whether we call this living reality Mother Earth, as Ntreh has done, may be a matter for discussion. But, we cannot avoid the fact that many of us have become so alienated from earth that we no longer recognize the living source of our being.

What is our human responsibility toward the very creation in which God is present and through which God breathes?

For discussion

Does Psalm 104 support the idea that we should have liturgies in which we participate in healing earth?

One side may argue that Lutheran worship is ultimately about expressing our personal relationship of faith in Christ and receiving the blessings that flow from God’s gifts of Word and sacrament. We should give thanks for the gifts of creation, but we are not responsible for healing creation. Heaven is our home, so why worry about earth?

The other side would argue, based on Psalm 104, that we should join with God, the Creator, in celebrating with creation (*cf.* Ps 148). We participate with God in helping to heal creation. Celebrating with creation is part of the healing process. Confessing our crimes against creation is necessary if we are to have peace with God. If we are to work with the Spirit in healing our personal lives, surely we ought to be working with that same Spirit in healing the earth from which we were born. We are children of the earth who have been given new life.

Norman Habel

Do you agree with Ntreh? Is the ground or earth like a mother with whom God works to bring forth life? If so, is earth alive?

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¹ Abotchie Ntrel, "The Survival of Earth: An African Reading of Psalm 104," in Norman Habel (ed.), *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets. Earth Bible Volume 4* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 107.



Romans 8:18–25

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

If you were to fly to Winnipeg, what would the landscape look like? Would you be struck by the beauty of the earth, its blue oceans, its green forests, its mighty glaciers, rivers and fertile plains? Or would you also see wounds on the land—uncontrolled burning or logging, clear-cutting of huge swaths of forest, flooding, development and urban sprawl, or other evidence of human-caused destruction of nature? Would you notice signs that the land needs healing?

This passage from Romans 8 proclaims cosmic hope and healing. We sometimes tend to individualize salvation in reading Paul's letters. But Romans 8 serves as a striking corrective to such anthropomorphism, linking the salvation of humans to the healing of the land and the redemption of the entire created world.

A *kairos* moment for creation?

The word *kairos* (“time”) in verse 18 provides an important key to this passage. We live at a turning of the ages, Paul says. The sufferings of this present time or *kairos* are nothing compared to the amazing future glory that is about to be revealed. Romans 8 is rich in eschatological language, proclaiming a deep longing for our future. Three times Paul uses the word “wait” (*apekdechomai*, in verses 19, 23, 25); three times he speaks of the “groans” experienced in awaiting our new future (in verses 22, 23, 26).

The language of Romans 8 is ecological as well as eschatological. Not only humanity but the whole creation waits for its redemption, the future that has already been inaugurated in Christ. The non-human created world “waits” with the same “eager expectation” as humans (Rom 8:19); see Philippians 1:20 for Paul’s description of his own “eager expectation” (*apokaradokia*). Together with us, the rest of creation awaits its liberation from enslavement into glorious freedom.

Creation subjected to futility

In Romans 1–3, Paul argued that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Rom 8:20 explains that nature, too, is fallen. Creation itself has been “subjected to futility” or to vanity, not as the result of

its own will, but by the one who subjected it.

Who has subjected creation, and why? Verse 20 is somewhat ambiguous. Clearly the subjection of nature in Romans 8:20 alludes to Genesis 1–3, the story of the creation and the fall. But is Satan the one who subjected nature? Or was it God? Or is Romans 8:20 referring to Adam and all sinful humans who have abused “dominion” over nature (Gen 1:28) and exploited the created world? Why does Paul say that creation has been subjected “in hope”? To which portion of Genesis 1–3 is Paul referring?

“The one who subjected” creation probably refers first of all to God, because only God could be said to have subjected creation “in hope” (a difficult passage to translate).¹ The reference then is Genesis 3:15–17, God’s curse against the ground as part of the curse against Adam and Eve.

But Paul may also be arguing in Romans 8:20 that creation is subject to the effects of humanity’s sin. Human-caused exploitation, of great concern to us today, was also critiqued by some in the ancient world. The first-century historian Tacitus, for example, decried Rome’s subjection of conquered territories as exploitive of both land and people:

Our lands and harvests [are taken] in requisition of grain; life and limb themselves are used up in leveling marsh and forest ... Britain pays a daily price for her own enslavement, and feeds the slavers.²

What are the sufferings of our *kairos* today? What does Paul’s sense of *kairos* mean for churches today? In South Africa in the 1980s, for example, Christians wrote a “*Kairos* Document” underscoring the urgency of ending apartheid. Is there a need for such a *kairos* response to global ecological suffering today? How is the healing of the land a theological problem? (see the Village Group chapter on “Healing Creation”)

Such a critique of Roman imperial exploitation might be part of what Paul means in Romans 8:21 by creation’s bondage to “futility” or “vanity.”³

Creation’s solidarity: groaning, waiting, hoping

Creation is “groaning together” with us. Paul uses the same words (*syn-stenazo*,

stenazo) for creation's groaning in verse 22 as for humans' inward groaning in verse 23. Our groans and creation's echo one another, as together we await what is to be revealed.

The repeated use of the prefix "with" (*syn*) throughout Romans 8 develops a strong sense of solidarity, expanding Christ's suffering (Rom 8:17) to include not only human suffering but the suffering of the whole cosmos. All of us—animals, birds, ozone—are "suffering with" Christ (*syn-pascho*, from which the word "sympathize" comes). All creation "travails together" in cosmic childbirth. The image of the travail of childbirth reflects traditional Jewish imagery of the eschaton or end-times, here developed in a creation-oriented direction.

What we await are the adoption and redemption of our bodies (verse 23, echoing verse 15). Creation, too, longs for the birth of those who will participate with God in its restoration, overcoming the legacy of corruption in the curse of the ground (Gen 3).

God's Spirit

God's Spirit undergirds this entire chapter. Creation's longings and our longings for redemption are set within the larger context of Paul's discussion of life in the Spirit, the theme of Romans 8:1–11.⁴ Poised between the "already" and "not yet" of redemption, we have already received a "spirit" of

How is creation's bondage or subjection manifested today in your own land and political situation? Are there connections between the suffering of creation described in Romans 8 and what is occurring in your land?

adoption (Rom 8:15, 23) and the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8:23).

Strikingly, the intercession of God's Spirit on our behalf is described in Romans 8:26 using the same word that was used for creation's and our groaning (Rom 8:22,23). Interceding for us with "groans" (*stenagmois*) too deep for words, God's Spirit echoes and takes up our own groaning and the groaning of the whole world. Through the work of God's Spirit, we hope for healing for the whole creation.

Cosmic hope

Paul concludes the passage with a wonderful proclamation of "hope" (Rom 8:24–25), a word repeated five times. Hope and eager expectation for the cosmos go together. We cannot yet see the results of our hope. But, if we hope for what we do not see we await it with bold "endurance" (*hypomone*, sometimes translated as "patience").

Barbara Rossing

What are your deepest hopes for the healing of the land? How does the hope raised up in this passage sustain you for the long haul?

Notes

¹ See discussion in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 508.

² Tacitus *Agricola* 30; quoted by Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 52.

³ So Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia Commentary; Fortress Press, forthcoming); personal communication.

⁴ As Ernst Käsemann notes about the prominence of the spirit in Romans 8:26–27, “the boldness of the train of thought in Romans 8 is constantly surprising.” See Ernst Käseman, “The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church,” in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 122.



Day 7:

Liberate from Bondage

Exodus 1:15–2:15

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.” ^{2:1} Now a man from the house of Levi

went and married a Levite woman.² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said.⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?”⁸ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.⁹ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”¹¹ One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk.¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.¹³ When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?”¹⁴ He answered, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought, “Surely the thing is known.”¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

This is a narrative of resistance, the story of a cast of women who maneuvered within an oppressive system to contribute to the struggle for liberation from bondage. These women play an essential role. The text presents them as “defiers of oppression ... givers of life ... wise and resourceful.”¹

The midwives

Exodus 1:15–22: The text begins with the story of the midwives, the second phase in Pharaoh’s intensifying plan to wipe out the Israelites who had become “more numerous and more powerful” than the Egyptians (Ex 1:9). Social and physical abuse of the Israelites has failed to reduce their numbers. The Pharaoh summons the midwives Shiprah and Puah. The two named women stand before an unnamed, paranoid king. The

authors of the text, eager to usher in the arrival of Moses, tell in only a few verses of these two midwives who refused to obey the Pharaoh’s directive to kill the new born sons of Israel. They thereby upset the oppressor.

When instructed to kill the newborn sons of Israel, the two midwives say nothing in response. They continue to go about their business of assisting women to give birth to new life. Very little is known about these women—their nationality, their faith or piety. Are they the “Egyptian midwives of the Hebrews,” or “Hebrew women” who are midwives to the Hebrews? Whether Egyptian or Hebrew, they refuse to function as agents of death, even though the command was given by the Pharaoh himself. But why? The text says that they feared *ha elohim*—the gods (Ex 1:17). Is the god they fear the God of the Hebrews? Or do they just fear the divine in general?

Are they protecting their own people, or are they taking up the cause of a community that is not their own? Whoever they are and whatever their motives, they refused to be intimidated by the powers that be, who wanted them to turn birth into death.

When called to the palace because of their disobedience, the midwives merely shrug: The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them. Their response is ingenious. First, they counted on the fact that the male Pharaoh probably knew little about women's experiences. Moreover, the Pharaoh hesitated to question them any further, possibly out of fear of revealing his ignorance.

Second, the response seemed to have appealed to the Pharaoh's racist tendencies, the "us/them" mentality. They declare that these Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are *hayot*, "like animals," who do not need midwives. The midwives imply that the Hebrew women seem to be good only for breeding, and hence they deliver before the midwife arrives. The information confirms the Pharaoh's suspicions that the Hebrews are different, and that pleases him.²

Third, they also affirm what the Pharaoh cannot hear. The Hebrew women are, they argue, *hayot*, which also is rendered as "full of life."

They stand in the tradition of Eve, the mother of all living beings. These mothers are so full of life that even a death-dealing Pharaoh cannot quench its force. And indeed Pharaoh is no match for maternal power.³

God does not speak to them from a burning bush. Their actions are guided explic-

itly by their fear of the gods, implicitly by an innate respect for life and love of children. They have no authority to confront the Pharaoh directly, no strength to make demands of him, no power to call down plagues upon him. They simply circumvent him. They out-manuever him, appealing to his ignorance and his prejudice. Their quiet revolt buys time for the Hebrew children. More children are born and they thrive. God rewards the midwives' efforts and blesses them with households of their own.

Eventually, however, the Pharaoh renews his assault, this time assigning all Egyptians the task of Hebrew infanticide. Into this vicious context the baby Moses is born.

Jochebed, Miriam and the daughter of Pharaoh

Exodus 2:1–10: The quiet defiance and scheming, the risking and the process of liberation begun by the midwives is continued by other women. After his birth, his mother Jochebed (Ex 6:20) saw that he was a fine baby, so she hid him. When she could not hide him any longer, she prepared a basket for him, and placed him in the reeds of the Nile. In doing so, she paradoxically was following the orders of the Pharaoh. The river, however, turns out to be a source of salvation rather than death. Safe in a watertight basket, watched over by his sister, the baby is placed among the reeds on the bank of the river.

Jochebed probably knew that something significant might occur. Hence, she instructs Moses' sister to watch and see "what would happen to him" (Ex 2:4). Very soon the Pharaoh's daughter and her entourage come down to the river to bathe. The Pharaoh's daughter would not bathe at just any place along the river. Jochebed knew where she bathed and placed the basket holding Moses in a strategic location, hoping that the prin-

From where do these women derive their sense of responsibility?

cess would find him. In a sense, Jochebed places the fate of the child at the feet of the Pharaoh's daughter, somehow intuiting, hoping and trusting that this daughter of the Pharaoh could not carry out her father's vicious policy.

Her risk pays off. Pharaoh's daughter sees the child, hears his cry and is filled with compassion. She knows well that the child was one of the Hebrew children. Yet she

embodies a compassion that goes beyond the natural feelings of pity for a crying infant; it is compassion for one whom she recognizes as the child of the enemy, one of the Hebrew children.³

When it becomes clear that she seems ready to take responsibility for the infant, Miriam comes forward and offers to find her a wet nurse. She brings Jochebed to nurse him!

It would be naïve to think that the Pharaoh's daughter was unaware of what was transpiring. It is more plausible that she silently acknowledged the efforts being made to save the child from death. The actions of this non-Israelite woman are presented in direct parallel to those of the God of Israel: she "comes down," she "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs (*cf.* Ex 3:7–8).⁴ Soon God does for Israel what she does for Moses.

The daughter of Pharaoh aligns herself with the daughters of Israel. Filial allegiance is broken; class lines crossed; racial and political difference transcended.⁵

How does a person born to privilege become obsessed with a sense of justice? From where did Moses get such a sense of justice that he would rise up in righteous anger? Why were his blood ties to the Hebrew slaves more significant than his obvious, daily ties to the Egyptian throne and its power?²²

So it was that his own mother nursed the infant Moses, although the Egyptian princess adopted him. Throughout the whole story, when we look for God's providential action, it is found not in direct divine intervention, but through the sagacity and resourcefulness of these women. The birth of Moses and his being saved from death are due to the actions of women.

As the years went by, Moses grew up as a young prince in the power, pomp and luxury of the palace. The people to whom he was related by blood were living in slavery, while Moses lived in luxury.

Moses: from prince to fugitive

Exodus 2:11–15: We would expect Moses to stay in that comfortable, exclusive world. He had been reared and educated to be an Egyptian, a member of the ruling class, and it would have been highly advantageous for him to maintain that position.

However, a day came when Moses "went out to his people and saw their forced labor" (Ex 2:11). Here, the verb "to see" is found in a form meaning that Moses was "caused to see." Was God behind this apparent and sudden recognition of the Hebrews' plight? Surely he must have ventured out before and seen how the Hebrew slaves were treated! Something happened inside him that made him "see" and act. On noticing one of the Egyptian overseers beating one of his people, a blood relative, he stepped forward in righteous anger and killed the overseer. With that act of earnest, but misplaced idealism, the prince became a fugitive.

It is hard to say what would have happened to the Israelites had Moses not had such a strong sense of justice. Could it have been that his mother, while nursing him told him of the slavery of the Hebrews under Egyptian domination, of the God of the Hebrews? It is possible that she spoke of the day of deliverance from

bondage to be brought about by a leader under the guidance of their God? She probably sang to him,

the songs of faith; and that in doing so, she planted in his soul, with words and rhythm, the pride of a people and the glory of their faith in God.⁶

Besides his biological mother, the mother who adopted him also circumvented the Pharaoh's rule and saved him from death. She could also have instilled in him a respect for life, justice and human rights. We do not know how much connection he had to his sister while living at the palace, but she too may have told him a little about the Hebrews, their history and their God.

In any case, Moses seems to have been influenced by his family, both natural and adopted. They inculcated in him a sense of justice and appreciation for life. These innate lessons came to the fore when he saw the Hebrew slave being beaten.

What can we learn from this text?

- Liberation is achieved through joint endeavors. We must acknowl-

edge the corporate dimension of the struggle and the efforts to overcome oppression. Women who are too frequently ignored have ways of defying oppression and bringing about liberation.

- For true liberation, we need to transcend barriers of caste, class, religion, race and gender.
- Leave room for intuition, or for what may not be logical, but is bred into a person's very being. God speaks to us often through the simple goodness we encounter in a variety of people. That goodness, and the nature of the relationship, causes us to hear and to learn in a fashion that is much deeper than pure logic.
- There is no single or pure strategy for liberation to be achieved. We need to be resourceful and wise to discern the most appropriate strategy, even if this means maneuvering within an oppressive system.

Monica J. Melanchthon

What are some of the struggles for liberation in your context? What contributions are women making to the struggle for freedom? How have issues of race, class, gender or caste hindered the fight for liberation? In your context, what devices of resistance do communities in struggle use? Where or from whom do we derive our own sense of justice, especially those of us who live lives of privilege and opportunity?

Notes

¹ J. Cheryl Exum, "You shall let every Daughter Live": A Study of Ex 1:8–2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983), p. 82.

² Dana Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 92.

³ *Ibid.*

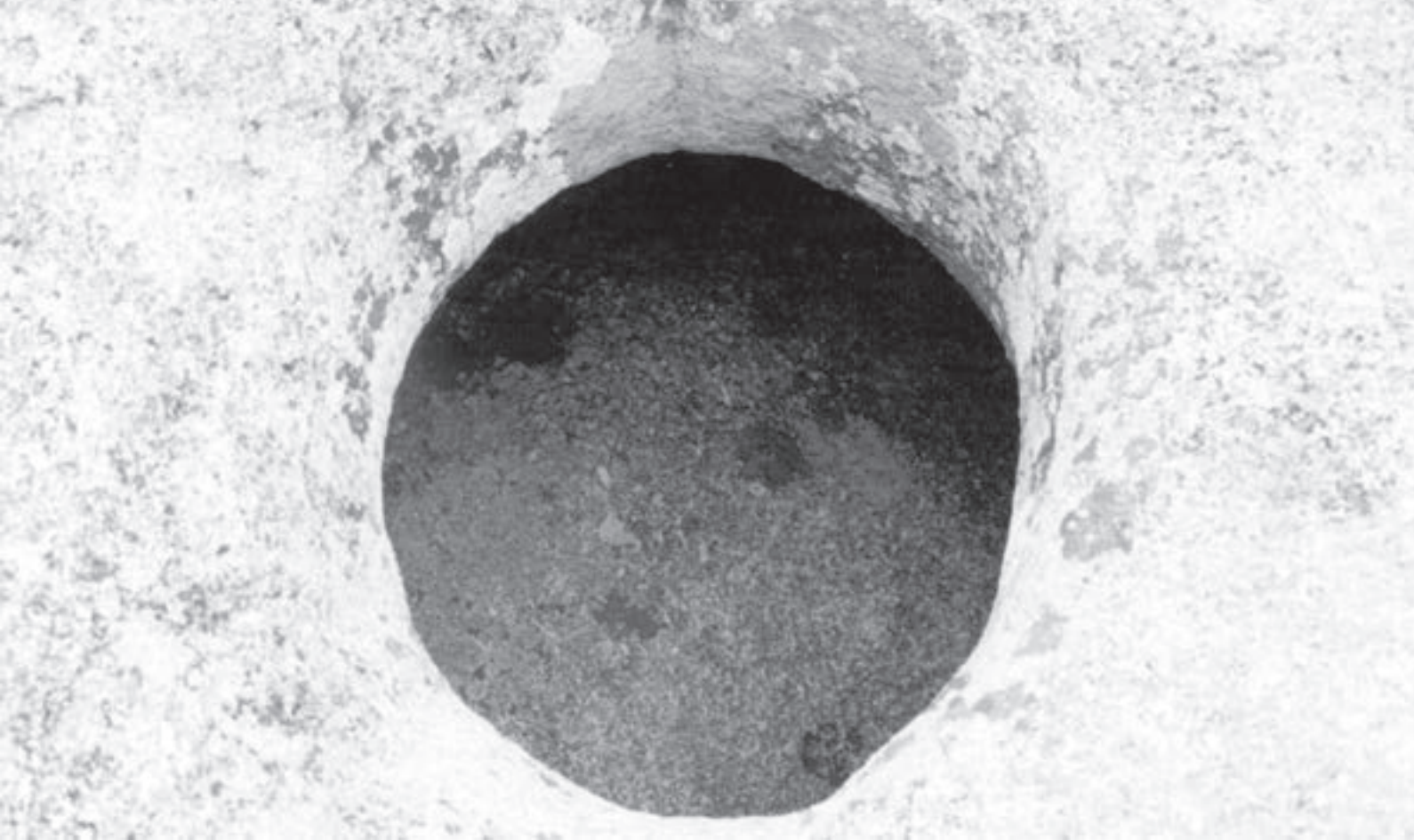
⁴ Eileen Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," in Peggy Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 179.

⁵ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus. Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 38.

⁶ Phyllis Tribble, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies," in Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 26.

⁷ J. Ellsworth Kalas, "Because my Mother Told Me," in *Old Testament Stories from the Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.



Luke 8:26–36

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the

demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying,³⁹ “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Deliver us from evil—the combat for human dignity

This is an uncomfortable story. The graphic description of a demoniac, the contest between Jesus and the demon Legion, and the horrific fate of a large herd of pigs—all this is elaborated beyond the usual constraints in Gospel accounts of Jesus’ healings. It has a taste of ostentatious performance, evoking fear as much as joy. This is not the mild mercy of healing hands; this is healing as combat. This is showing who in the end is in complete command in a world constantly threatened by chaos and disruptive forces. Which power is this? Whose power is it?

Having mastered the storm and the raging waves (Lk 8:22–25) Jesus goes ashore on Gerasene territory. Its location is identified, yet we can no longer identify the place with any certainty. Could it not be anywhere and everywhere? It could not. Jesus has moved to “the opposite side.” Most likely he is on

pagan, that is non-Jewish, ground. Since pigs are unclean animals to Jews, the presence of a large herd of swine feeding on the hillside would not be possible in a Jewish setting. So by crossing the sea, Jesus arrives in the land of “the others.”

Having calmed the threatening powers of the roaring sea and the fear of his disciples, this calm is gone the moment he steps on land. The first person to welcome him is without clothes, a wild and screaming man. He is possessed, or as the text rather particularly states, he has a demon. A distinction is made between the demon and the man himself. Luke informs us that he is “a man of the city”; he belongs to the place, but has become alienated from it. He exists on the fringes, even outside human community. He loiters naked among the tombs or is driven into the desert; places the living avoid, where demons were said to roam. The possession had dispossessed him of everything he ever had. And yet, despite his alienation and raving behavior, he is still a human being, “a man of the city.”

Are there persons in your community like this man? How do others relate to them?

Surprisingly, Jesus' power to exorcise or command the unclean spirit to leave the man is not a major issue in the story. It is mentioned almost parenthetically in verse 29. The dialogue or contest between Jesus and the demon is over the conditions of the demon's surrender: Where should the unclean spirit be allowed to go?

In the negotiation between Jesus and the demon the revealing of names plays an important role. Behind this is a popular belief and the fundamental premise in magic that a strong bond exists between a spiritual being and its true name. Domination over a spirit is obtained by knowing and using its name. There is power in knowing the name; calling out the name is an effective weapon. In the healing stories the demons often know Jesus' true name and reveal who he is. On the whole they are right; they speak the truth. It may sound strange that the very same words that are a proclamation of faith in the mouth of a believer, can be a demonic threat and serve almost as a curse. How can one know for sure which is which?

In this present story, the demons seek to control Jesus by pronouncing his name. But when asked about their own name, the demons try to distract Jesus by giving their number or a pseudonym implying number: Legion. Legion is a word from the Latin. The Roman military unit called the *Legio* consisted of between four and six thousand soldiers. Does the demons' name indicate not only a number, but also a political, anti-Roman meaning or code? Is the demon in fact the Roman army, keeping people under occupation and in bondage? Is this a story about liberation from political and social oppression? The time has come indeed for captives to be released and the oppressed to go free, as Jesus programmatically proclaimed in his first public speech (Lk 4). Even if it is difficult to find a political statement embedded in the name Legion, such an association need not be excluded. But it may be a conve-

What is the power of naming in your culture? How are demons and demonic forces viewed in your society? By your church? What are the implications if we speak of evil forces or use such language about other people and movements?

niently neat demythologized reading, assuming that demons are abolished and replaced by political and social entities which then take on demonic features.

Within the story the name "Legion" is explained in verse 30 as a matter of number. It is not just one demon but a whole multitude. Letting them loose has a potentially devastating result, and should be handled with care. The demons acknowledge their defeat in having to leave the man, and beg not to be tormented: Jesus should not "order them to go back into the abyss." In Mark's version of the story (Mk 5:1–20) the demons fear being sent out of the region, but Luke makes them fear being dismissed to their place of origin, the abyss where the spirits are confined (*cf.* Rev 11:7; 17:8 and 20:3).

The image comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew *tehom* or "the deep," the sea under the earth where the monsters live. This was the symbol of threatening chaos and disorder, constantly kept under control by the Creator. In stormy weather every sea might become a place of this same recurring drama. Therefore, the combination of the two stories, the calming of the storm and the healing of Gerasene demoniac, is not just a matter of narrative or scene shifting to get Jesus from one side of the sea to the other. From the first story we already know that the winds and the water obey Jesus: he is in command even of the abyss.

What does it mean to you for Jesus to be in command of "the abyss" in your life or world?

Apparently, Jesus allows the multitude of demons to stay around and, according to their own wish, the unclean spirits enter a large herd of unclean animals. One could pity the swine, or be amused by the humorous aspect of the story. The demons get to where they want to go, but their effect on the swine is such that they end up in deep water anyway. Jesus actually dupes them.

With the demons kept safely in their place, Jesus restores good order; he keeps the ordered world in place. The naked and screaming man, closer to dead than living, is now “clothed and in his right mind.” The Greek term *sofrosyne* (here translated “in his right mind”) is sobriety and clear-sightedness. This Greco-Roman virtue of self-control was very highly esteemed. The man is restored to his senses and to the human community. He becomes what he was supposed to be: “a man of the city.” His dignity as a human being is again manifest for everyone to see and recognize.

As the spectacular news start to spread, the local people do not rejoice.

They are scared, so scared that they ask Jesus to leave. A large herd of swine is lost and there are powers at work which are dangerously strong and seemingly uncontrollable. The city is not ready to accept that the healing and restoration of this man to the city is beneficial and good to anyone other than himself. No wonder that he wants to stay with Jesus! But Jesus sends him away, telling him to return to his home.

In a place full of fearful hostility, the man from whom the demon has been driven is called to be a witness to God’s good deeds by speaking from his own experience. A healing story ends as a missionary story. Perhaps this story first was transmitted as an account of how a Christian community was founded here. They kept repeating and elaborating how the gospel was first proclaimed among them by a demoniac who under dramatic circumstances had been restored by Jesus to full human dignity and belonging. This is what God can do.

Turid Karlsen Seim

When people today are restored to health, for example, from mental illness, how ready are people to receive them back into the community?



Day 8: Rectify Injustices...

Micah 6:1–8

¹ Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³ “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.” ⁶ “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Good prophets are hard to find today. Do you have a prophet, like Micah, in your country who is willing to confront the government or the church with the truth about how they treat people? Does that prophet also have a solution for healing? In 2002, the prophets in Australia were a group of lawyers challenging the government to grant amnesty and citizenship to refugees and asylum seekers. Who are the healing prophets in your land?

The covenant

To understand the bold and daring words of Micah we first need to understand the nature of a covenant (*berit*) in the Old Testament. A covenant is like a treaty. Treaties in the ancient Near East had a basic form or structure:

- A preamble addressing the sovereign making the treaty.
- An historical prologue describing previous relations between the two parties, including the deeds of the sovereign.
- Stipulations or requirements to be kept to maintain the treaty.
- Provisions for preserving and a regular reading of the covenant.
- Witnesses to the treaty, including the gods and parts of nature.
- Curses and blessings on those who were unfaithful or faithful to the treaty.

Elements of this treaty form were used in various ways to express the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments, for example, are preceded by a preamble acknowledging Yahweh as the God and

sovereign over Israel and a summary of what Yahweh has done in bringing Israel out of Egypt (Ex 20:2). In the covenant Joshua makes with Israel, he includes a lengthy account of past relations and Yahweh's "saving acts" on Israel's behalf (Josh 24:2–13).

Taking Israel to court

Micah's problem is that Israel has broken its covenant with Yahweh, its God. He declares that God is taking Israel to court for breaking the covenant. The situation is deadly serious. Listen to how Micah begins:

Rise, plead your case [rib] before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy [rib] of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy [rib] with his people (Mic 6:1–2).

The Hebrew expression *rib* is a technical term for a court case or pleading a case in court. Micah hears God summoning the people of Israel to plead their case at court. Why? Because God has a case against Israel. Israel has broken the covenant. Israel is on trial!

Why are the hills, the mountains, and the very foundations of earth involved? These domains of creation are the witnesses to the original creation. Now they

How can Micah bring home to Israel the seriousness of the situation? How can he convince them of the need to return to basics, to restore their community, heal the rift and renew the covenant?

are called to testify to the original covenant, and to support God's accusations against Israel.

God's saving acts

In verses 3–5, God's side of the story is presented. God declares what God has done to remain faithful to the covenant. God rescued Israel from Egypt and delivered the people from slavery, a mighty deed that sometimes is called the "gospel of the Old Testament." As an act of sheer grace, God redeemed a helpless and undeserving bunch of slaves, and promised to make them a people. God's undeserved love is implied in the term "redeem" used in verse 4.

Why did God do all these things for Israel? To prove this God was superior to the other gods of the day?

The answer is given at the end of verse 5, "that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." The expression translated as "saving acts" (*tsidqot*) literally is the "righteousnesses" of Yahweh. The *tsidqot* of Yahweh are those deeds of God's that reflect God's identity; God is a God whose righteous love reaches out to those in need, and finds a way to restore, rescue or liberate.

A possible defense

After presenting God's case, Micah imagines Israel speaking (verses 5–7). Israel knows that she is guilty. She does not try to justify her misdeeds. Instead, we hear her reflecting on how she might appease the anger of her aggrieved partner in the covenant. Israel wonders what kind of gift—like a bribe—will be sufficient to satisfy the demands of an angry God.

The wrong committed is so great that Israel thinks in terms of gifts that are "over the top"—such as thousands of rams for sacrifice to appease God's anger, or ten thousand rivers of olive oil

If the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt reflected the character of God, what are the saving acts/righteous deeds of love which reflect that same character of God in the New Testament?

that would burn as an eternal flame. Israel even considers the supreme sacrifice, a first-born son. The innuendoes here are quite powerful. Abraham had been tested to offer his first-born son, but God said, "No!" The Egyptians had lost their first-born sons in the final plague that saved the Israelites. Should they now offer their first-born sons? The sacrifice of a child was condemned as wrong. Surely they would not have to do what was forbidden! No animal or child sacrifice will work. Not even the riches of the world are sufficient. Israel cannot make God forget her sins by lavish rituals, grand gestures or bribes. There are no "deals" with God, only repentance.

The core value

The verdict in the trial that Micah presents, the list of the wrongs Israel has committed, the pronouncement of God's judgement follow later in this chapter (verses 9–16). The verdict is a declaration of what might be called the core of the covenant, the basic values associated with living in a constructive covenant relationship with Yahweh:

and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8).

Notice that Micah does not list a set of laws or commandments, such as the Decalogue. He does not demand regular worship in a particular form. Nor does he expect great achievements in war or mission. Instead, Micah reflects the radical orientation of several Old Testament prophets: the heart of the covenant is social justice.

Have you met people who think they can bargain with God, make a deal and appease God's anger or win God's favor? What is wrong with this approach? What do we know about how we are to come before God?

There are three features to this radical expectation: justice (*mishpat*), kindness (*chesed*) and walking humbly. The term *mishpat* is usually translated as justice; it refers to restorative justice rather than retributive justice. This term, common among the prophets, refers to making the right decision (judgement) and to the process of setting things right in the family and the community. It is this capacity that Solomon requests (1 Kings 3:11). In Isaiah 1:17 it is clear that for the prophets, seeking justice means "rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow." Micah claims that he is filled not only with God's Spirit, but with this urge for justice (Mic 3:8).

The Hebrew term *chesed* is sometimes translated as "loving kindness,"

but is probably closer to "covenant loyalty." The term implies not only compassion, but fidelity to the principles of justice and care inherent in the covenant. In Genesis 24:27 for example, the servant blesses Yahweh as the God who has not forsaken his *chesed* (steadfast loyalty) and faithfulness to Abraham. To "love" loyalty is to make covenant fidelity and compassion one's top priority in life.

The third expression, "walk humbly with God" is quite rare, but complements the other two expressions. The faithful person is to walk humbly, seeking to know God as a constant caring companion in the search for justice and healing in the covenant community.

God expects the people of the covenant to focus on a justice that restores, sets things right, overcomes oppression, exhibits compassion for the unfortunate and heals communities.

Norman Habel

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In what ways is the church pursuing this kind of justice in your community? Who are some prophets in our day who help expose where the church has avoided pursuing justice?



Luke 1:46–55

⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Like Hannah, Mary knew how to sing the topsy-turvy upside-downside good news carol for the poor and the hungry, victimized, oppressed. At our eternal peril we choose to ignore the thunder and tenor of her song, its revolutionary beat.¹

There are several instances in the Bible where, in response to a personal and community experience, the individual or the community breaks into a song of praise and thanksgiving (the song of Moses—Ex 15:1–18; Miriam—Ex 15:21; Hannah—1 Sam 2:1–10; of David—2 Sam 22:2–51). The Magnificat is one such song, placed on the lips of Mary of Nazareth. Before looking at this song, it is important to know a little about the singer.

Who was Mary?

Mary was a Jewish girl of royal descent, but of an otherwise obscure and ordinary family. She was a poor, working-class girl betrothed to Joseph, a local carpenter. She lived during the Roman occupation. Her spirituality reflects that of a religious movement in Israel based on messianic expectations. Because body and spirit are one in Judaism, to meditate on the hope of salvation is to speculate on when and where the Messiah would come, and of whom he would be born. Mary, like many others of her time and community, must have also pondered these things. She evidently was a thoughtful and “interior” person, but her thoughts were the thoughts of her people, its prophecies, hopes and despair.

One day she has a disturbing vision which startles her out of her wits. Even more astonishing than the presence of the angel in her home was the angel’s message, informing her that she was going to have a baby. This seemed impossible, for she knew no man. Besides, what was she going to tell Joseph?

Perhaps, it was the imminence of marriage, a concrete and practical reality, that challenged her intense, highly private spiritual life. Whatever the case,

suddenly she felt a unique demand. Her response was a self-giving so total that she was subsumed in that giving. She was to conceive a baby, which is above all a bodily event.

Mary’s response is that of a creature to its Creator; it is her own personal and unique response of love. Once she replies, she herself becomes the unique place of exchange between the divine and the human. She is not merely passive; she willingly and consciously cooperates in God’s work of procreation. Her whole body responds to its Creator and Redeemer. She is a co-worker, in whose body God’s body is to be formed.

Mary is the “handmaid,” the slave of Yahweh. She is one of the poor, the *anawim* of Yahweh, through whom God’s passion and love for human beings break through to all creation.² She is earth, body and “medium of exchange.” She is all three consciously and willingly, actively and sensitively, as a real human life. Her courage and doubt, joy and bewilderment, deep pain and utter fidelity are all involved.

Upon the angel’s departure, Mary realizes the significance and magnitude of the task she had accepted. With this comes the revealing of a God who risks the divine reputation by choosing an unmarried, lowly handmaiden to become the bearer of God’s holy child, the Messiah. His arrival has been awaited with anticipation as the one who will rectify the injustices in the world. Hence, the moment of breakthrough for Mary was also the beginning of the breakthrough of salvation for all creation. One kind of breakthrough prepares the way for another kind. Her personal experience of salvation gives her the courage to envision salvation for the rest of the community.

Mary then visits her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who also is pregnant. There she discovers another miracle and occasion for rejoicing and praising God. Mary could not contain her wonder, her joy and delight. She bursts into song.

The Magnificat

The song is called “The Magnificat,” because in Jerome’s Latin version the first words are *Magnificat anima mea Dominu* (My soul magnifies the Lord). The song, which expresses deep emotion and strong conviction, has two parts. The first part (verses 47–49) describes Mary’s exultation at what God is doing for her and the second (verses 50–55) is her exultation at what God is doing for Israel. They have a common theme: the lowly being lifted up and what is high being cast down. All this is done in remembrance of God’s mercy. She portrays her new vision of God in poetry. In Israel, as in many other cultures, poetry is a recognized form of theology. It is a cultural revolution that could serve as the forerunner to social revolution.³

Mary begins with praise: her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Why? Because in her God has turned things upside down! Any other god would surely have chosen a mother of a higher standing to bear God’s Son. But this God to whom Mary is singing has stooped to regard the low estate of God’s handmaiden. This God pays special attention to the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved. If you are looking for a savior, you will not find him in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Look for him in the back streets of Nazareth, the city of which it has been said, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (Jn 1:46). God is not bound to human estimates of worth, status and power. Hence, it is a peasant girl, one of no consequence, whom God raises up, and whom henceforth all generations will call blessed.

The song which starts with God’s favoring the lowliness of God’s servant Mary, stirs up historical consciousness in her, and leads her to look at the revolutionary actions of God in the history of Israel: God has helped God’s servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy. Mary sees her own experience as being also applicable to social patterns. Deprived groups were raised up, and those on top cast down. With such unsettling and disconcerting notions, Mary’s song continues.

She moves from singing about herself to singing about all those who worship God from generation to generation. What will it be like when the reversals come at the hand of a God whose arm has shown strength? God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. These are not simply the rich but those with pride in their abilities, who are over-confident, who feel little need for God in their lives. They will be “scattered” in such a way that they will be unable to find themselves.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. Those who are powerful politically, economically, culturally, religiously, racially, sexually, or by virtue of their caste, those who manipulate, control and subjugate others, and rob them of their humanity will be brought down or toppled. Those who have no power, the “no people,”—Dalits, women, people who until now have not mattered, whose destinies have always been in the hands of the powerful, whose identity and individuality have been demoralized and whose culture has been erased—**they** will be lifted up.

God had filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. The hungry are those who suffer from physical hunger in contexts of poverty, discrimination and unjust sharing of resources. There is enough food for all and yet millions all over the world suffer for want of food. In countries of extreme

poverty, hunger prevails alongside food surpluses. Advanced technology and modern food production have not eradicated hunger. Surplus food is often thrown away or, literally, thrown to the dogs rather than shared with the hungry. Many are deprived of food on account of caste, gender or race. Dogs and human beings are fighting each other for the crumbs thrown away by the rich. The hungry are also those who hunger for justice, both for themselves and for the world in which they live. For all of these, Mary envisions due justice and recompense for the hardships and the want they have endured.

The rich are the non-hungry as well as those who manipulate and use the judicial and economic systems for their own selfish gains. They go to the courts for further benefits, but God will send them away empty. Their scheming, ma-

neuvering and manipulating of the system will no longer bear fruit.

In verses 54 and 55, Mary celebrates the mercy of God shown to Israel, a small insignificant nation located between the powers of Assyria, Babylon, Egypt and now Rome. A nation which despite its apparent weakness was chosen to be the servant of God. There are more references or allusions to God's mercy than to God's power. The oppressed find solace in a compassionate God who exercises God's mercy in remembrance of the promises made to the ancestors. The celebration of God's sovereignty and power in the Magnificat is placed within the context of God's liberative activity in favor of the oppressed and lowly. God's power is not an enslaving but a liberative power that promises to rectify injustices.

Monica J. Melanchthon

Who are the "Marys" of today? How can individual experiences of salvation be translated into liberation for a whole people? How can you participate in the coming of God's justice?

Notes

¹ Thomas John Carlisle, "Revolutionary Carol," in *Beginning with Mary: Women of the Gospels in Portrait* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 4.

² Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 140.

³ V. Devasahayam, "Formative factors of Dalit Theology: Luke 1:26–45, Mary, the First Christian Theologian," in *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1997), p. 12.



Day 9: Empower Us to Act

Isaiah 61:1–4

¹The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. ⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Who is addressed?

Biblical scholars as well as communities of faith have re-discovered God's preferential solidarity and identification with the poor. The many laws and ordinances in Scripture that provide for the poor and the destitute indicate God's concern for the weak. God cares for the poor, sides with the oppressed and expects the community to do likewise. The prophetic writings emphasize the collective responsibility for either the disintegration and destruction or the promotion of the community's life.¹ The wholeness of life can be perceived and realized only as life in community.

This text speaks to the privileged **and** to the oppressed. Both are in a state of paralysis, which hinders them from carrying out God's commission. Each group has its own reasons for not doing so. The privileged are hesitant to carry this out because it shakes up the status quo, while the oppressed feel powerless to do anything, having grown accustomed to a culture of receiving. Hence, the system of domination and subjugation is self-perpetuating. A countervailing system is needed that builds upon mutual respect, care and equity.

The first person account in Isaiah 61:1–3 provides a dim glimpse of the prophet popularly known as Third Isaiah. This passage is frequently used to characterize the prophet and his vocation. Because this passage has many themes found in Second Isaiah (*cf.* Isa 42) this perhaps is not from an identifiable prophet.

What sort of a prophet is he who merely echoes the thought of an earlier prophetic figure? It should be apparent that we are not witnessing a new outpouring of the classical prophetic spirit here, but rather the studied reiteration of an earlier prophet's message.²

What is important is how these recurring words from Second Isaiah function in the new context of the program of restoration in Isaiah 60:62. Isaiah 61:2–4 contains the commission of the prophet. This lends authority to the program of restoration by relating it unmistakably to the commission of the servant of Second Isaiah.

In the original context, the speaker was an individual, probably a spokesperson (the prophet?) on behalf of the community (*cf.* Isa 49:3). But in its new setting, this prophetic heritage is adapted by the community. The prophet's office is now collectively interpreted, as an intermediary between Yahweh and the covenant community. To the impoverished, the blind, the mourning, the imprisoned and brokenhearted, the message was one of imminent healing and salvation.

What kind of community is more likely to respond to this kind of message?

The text points to a context of suffering and pain. The setting is post-exilic Jerusalem. The exiles had returned to their homeland where they worked and contributed to rebuilding the community. Some of them, however, were apparently being deprived of enjoying the fruits of their labor. The speaker/s in the passage are, therefore, the have-nots, who are weary of the pragmatic claims of the priestly aristocracy who are mostly in control (*cf.* verses 6ff.).³

The speaker appears to be a member of a small community, an oppressed and outcast group with no power, status, or access to decision making in the larger community. This minority, however, saw itself as the real Israel, the righteous, chosen and the true servants of Yahweh. Hence, it was under active attack from adversaries of the larger community who did not consider them to be a part of the covenant community.⁴

The outpouring of the Spirit

This prophetic servant community claims no power in and of itself. In its post-exilic situation, it has no worldly power. Its power comes solely from the all-powerful spirit of Yahweh that rests upon it. The Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) carries the idea of power or vitality. It covers a whole range of physical, emotional, temperamental and volitional behavior. The temperament or disposition of a person was a reflection of his or her spirit. The Hebrews believed and prayed that God would put a new and right spirit in them (Ps 51:10). Worshipers longed for God's Spirit to abide in them forever so that they might think and act as God disposes.

This fresh outpouring of the Spirit leads to reaffirming and reapplying the words of the earlier prophecy. The individual office of the prophet develops into a collective office. The community as a body claims to carry on the office of the servant of Yahweh.

The sending

The God who delivers can disrupt social bondage and exploitation, overthrow ruthless orderings of public life, and authorize freedom, dignity and justice. The verbs refuse to accept any circumstance of oppression as a given. The Spirit works to send the community forth on a six-fold task.⁵

- **"To bring good news to the oppressed":** The servant community is sent to announce good tidings to the struggling community of Judah. The "oppressed" include the broken hearted, the blind, etc, as well as individuals who are economically, politically and socially subjugated. While all the other

categories mentioned below experience liberation or healing in some tangible way, the oppressed are given what seems to be only the "good news." This "good news" empowers the community to be conscious of their exploitation and to counteract it. It provokes resistance to exploitation and the discovery of strategies to overcome it.

- **"To bind up the brokenhearted":** There will be healing for those who are brokenhearted for whatever reason.
- **"To proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners":** Freedom is not only for those who are literally captive, but also for those who are figuratively captive to any form of domination and subjugation. The oppressed are responsible for working toward their own liberation.
- **"To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God":** The dawn of Yahweh's favor means good news for the poor who have unjustly been kept from rightfully sharing in the bounties of God's blessings. This is an allusion to the year of Jubilee. Whether it was practiced or not, it is seen as the culminating assertion of the God of Sinai (Ex 23), who intends a very different arrangement of economic wealth and social power. In short, a new era is dawning in which Yahweh's judgment on the people will be turned aside. Yahweh will repay Judah's enemies, and bestow good on Yahweh's sinful people.

- **“To provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning”:** They will be called “oaks of righteousness,” the planting of Yahweh to display Yahweh’s glory. This new name is given in order to bring glory to Yahweh in the eyes of all nations. They will receive fine clothing and festival unguent in place of the dust poured on the head and the veil worn over the face in the ceremonial lamentations for the dead. They will have praise on their lips for blessings received, instead of listlessness and despair over their situation.
- **“They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations”:** Repairing the devastation of many generations is pertinent for any theological reflection in a context where the devastation caused by caste, gender, class and race hierarchies have kept human communities in “ruins.” Devastated peoples can regain the full stature of a life in freedom and dignity, and stand up as “oaks of righteousness.”

As the passage continues,

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense ... Their descendants shall be known among the nations, ... For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations (Isa 61:8–11).

Our calling

This Isaiah 61:1–4 passage is cited in Luke 4:16–17. Here as well as elsewhere in Luke, it is a vision of an alternative world that apparently is linked to the Jubilee year, Israel’s most radical hope for release and redemption. These are not social programs or specific proposals. Instead, they are acts of public imagination that still need to be shaped for implementation. Positively, they are acts that push back the frontiers so that things not thought of previously can come into view. Critically, they are an assault on all controlled thinking that insists that the way the world is organized is the only way possible. The text highlights the theme of social reversal: the poor, who are continually subjected to bad news, will receive good news; both rich and poor captives, whose lives are bound, will be released; the blind, who have been denied sight, will see again; and, the oppressed will be freed or liberated. Everything is reversed. This reversal is possible only when both the privileged and the oppressed come out of their paralysis, and work towards helping each other and fostering change in the structures of society.

Such social protest must continue, because through this the true feelings of the people can be heard. What seems to be happening instead is that we as state, society, church or community are not responding to the protests within, unable to learn or be affected by them. We must allow the energies inherent in these protests to facilitate processes of social transformation, rather than allowing our vested interests to exterminate, co-opt, or corrupt those who are oppressed.

For full healing to take place, the gap between the privileged and the oppressed requires efforts to be made by both groups. Genuine social transforma-

tion is initiated from within the community. As the poor voice their pain, the rich and powerful must be generous in responding and in pursuing policies that humanize governance, whether by the

church or state, and that are guided by concern especially for those most vulnerable.

Monica J. Melanchthon

What are the areas where we as churches and as a Lutheran communion especially need to act? How?

Notes

¹ James Vijayakumar, “Old Testament Understanding of Human Development,” in R. Gomez (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Human Development* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1998), pp. 74–75.

² Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 65.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56–66* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.





Luke 13:10–17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing

A daughter of God's promise

On a sabbath Jesus attends worship in the local synagogue. He even teaches like he did on that sabbath in Nazareth when he made his programmatic speech at the beginning of his ministry (Lk 4:16–21). The fact that Jesus fulfilled such functions at the synagogue does not seem strange. It is simply part of the setting of the story, and is probably mentioned because it means that what he did could hardly go unnoticed. It is also taken for granted that a woman could appear at the synagogue, even though we wrongly assume that women could not be present in the Judaism of that time.

This woman has a chronic ailment. For eighteen years she has been bent over and unable to stand up straight. We might want to diagnose the condition in medical terms. Luke, however, offers the traditional explanation of the time and says that a spirit had possessed her. This later is reinforced when the spirit is named as Satan.

Some have interpreted the image of the bent woman as the prototypical illustration of the Lutheran understanding of the sinful person, who is *incurvatus/incurvata in se*—bent over, curled unto oneself. Preachers sometimes indulge in vivid descriptions of her condition as the inevitable and extreme self-orientation of someone who cannot straighten her back and raise her head to see the other person.

This is as close as one can get to an allegorical interpretation of a healing story. Tempting as it may be, it is not helpful. The damage done to people, who have to continue to live with their disabilities, is another cost of interpretations like this. People may rightly ask, “Why did Jesus not let her go without healing her? In fact, very few were healed and the others remained as they were. I must live with this tension: My

imperfect body is whole—with the disability.” (For more on this see the Village Group chapter on “Removing Barriers that Exclude.”) This is the painful dilemma of any healing story. But, in this particular case, there is also the temptation to make it a showcase for salvation.

Discuss examples of how this or other healing stories have been interpreted in painful ways like this.

The story of Jesus healing this woman is one of three sabbath healing narratives in Luke's Gospel. Both the time (the sabbath) and the place (the synagogue) are significant. Like many of the healing stories in Luke, the point of reference for this story is Jesus' programmatic address in the synagogue at Nazareth, also on a sabbath. Then, at the beginning of his ministry, he had claimed as his divine mandate the words from the prophets that overflow with promises of liberation associated with the Jubilee year. Now his action in another synagogue on another sabbath becomes a confirmation that indeed this was being fulfilled for them to witness.

The story in Luke 13:10–17 is probably paired with Luke 14:1–6, the healing of a man with dropsy, also on the sabbath. This pattern of parallel examples is characteristic of Luke. Some of the parallels involve a woman and a man. These “gender pairs” are like a narrative rejoinder to the composition of the group of disciples and the early Christian communities, a reminder that they consisted of men as well as women.

The restoration of the bent woman becomes a matter of controversy, and the healing story is dominated by the emerging conflict between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. The matter at stake is not the healing as such, nor that this particular woman was healed. Rather, the indignation is over its bad

timing: to heal is to work, and no work should take place on the sabbath. Apparently, Jewish miracle workers were expected to take the sabbath off. The holiness of this day of rest and worship should not be violated.

Jesus argues in favor of some work being necessary even on the sabbath. Do they not see to the needs of their animals on the sabbath? It is hypocritical not to heal the woman. The argument here is not that women should be treated at least as well as animals. Rather, Jesus is using a minor case to support a higher one. However, his opponents might respond that animals need water every day, while healing can take place any other day of the week. Jesus therefore insists that in this case the sabbath is the appropriate day. Why?

In this story, the dimension of being released or liberated is remarkably strong. Some of the Greek verbs used in the Old Testament are associated with creation and liberation. They are often translated by “freeing” or “setting free.” Jesus’ wondrous acts fulfil the liberating intention of the sabbath in that the woman is set free on this particular day, according to God’s will. In this connection Jesus refers to the woman as a daughter of Abraham. This is remarkably original language with no direct parallel usage in other texts at the time. Sons of Abraham we know, and also children, but daughters on the whole go unmentioned. Within the Jewish discourse

that Luke draws upon, descendants of Abraham are heirs to the promise God made to Abraham (*cf.* Lk 1:55).

The formulation in Luke 13:16 is an observation rather than the bestowal of an honor, even though it may subtly function in that way. This crippled and possessed woman **is** Abraham’s daughter; she does not become one. This status does not depend on her being healed by Jesus. Nor is this acknowledging any great or special piety or poverty on the woman’s part, as many interpreters assume. There is no indication anywhere in the story that she is a paragon of piety or should be counted among the *anawim*, the poor and pious, who now are being raised up. Indeed, “this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound for eighteen years,” sounds like a contradiction in terms. She is a woman with a tormenting disability who is quite simply recognized as a daughter of Abraham without any ties attached. But, it is highly appropriate that a daughter of Abraham is set free on the sabbath, the day that was an essential sign of God’s covenant with Israel.

Her healing is linked to her status as daughter, such that the healing realizes her status as daughter. The one, however, is not dependent on the other. Jesus makes this abundantly clear. She may be bent or straight, but she has her share in the blessings that flow from the fulfillment of God’s promise.

Turid Karlsen Seim

How does this healing story speak to those you know who yearn for release or liberation?



Day 10: Fulfill Your Promises, O God

Isaiah 65:17–25

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

"I have a dream!" These words of Martin Luther King inspired people throughout America and the world. He had a dream about a land where black and white could live in peace as equals. The prophet in Isaiah 65 also has a dream. Is it a healing dream we should try to follow? Or is it just a "pipe dream"?

Background

The vision of the prophet in this text is quite extraordinary, a vision of a new world with no weeping, no violence, no calamity. What kind of world gave rise to this dream? Coming at the end of the book of Isaiah, which contains numerous prophecies of doom and disaster, this dream stands out like a beacon, a flash of hope.

What is the background to this high hope? The only time in Israel's past when there was a sustained period of peace and prosperity was under king Solomon. But even then, prosperity came at a price. A considerable amount of slave labor and bonded labor was used to build the temple and palace of Solomon. A few people prospered, but many were poor. When Solomon died, the kingdom broke apart.

Israel suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Persians. Israel was a little land that the big powers tried to control. The final humiliation came with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, when the temple and palace built by Solomon were stripped bare. The leaders of the Israelite people were taken into exile, where they remained under alien rule. All of this happened, said prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, because Israel had broken the covenant and had been unfaithful to Yahweh. Israel was condemned by God and crushed by the world powers.

A vision of new earth and new heavens

After generations of prophets pronouncing doom, the prophet of Isaiah 65 has a dream. This prophet sees a new world coming that is greater than the reign of Solomon. Listen to his opening vision:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight (Isa 65:17–18).

What do you think this vision means? Is it a dream worth following?

There are three parts to the opening vision: the transformation of the world, the healing of bad memories and the creation of a new Jerusalem.

The scene portrayed here is not a vision of the end of the world. The new skies and the new earth are so different, so transformed that they are like a new creation. In fact, the very term for "create" in Genesis 1:1 is used here. That we are talking about a transformed creation is evident from the verses that follow: we meet the same Jerusalem, the same vineyards, the same people who live and die there. But things have changed, radically!

If this is a vision for God's people, why does God need to transform the heavens and the earth? Because they too have suffered under the judgement of God; they too have experienced the

How would you feel listening year after year to the prophecies of doom from prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah? See also the study on Micah 6. What effect does this kind of preaching have on a community?

curse—famines, desolation, violence. They too need to be renewed.

The vision of a new Zion

The vision includes a new Jerusalem or, its sacred name, a new Zion. Zion is central for several reasons. Jerusalem, the holy city of God's people, had been violated, desecrated and burned. A transformed Jerusalem meant home, a place where God's people could be assured of God's presence and care, a place called "my holy mountain" (verse 25).

Jerusalem, however, was more than a city for God's people; it was also viewed as the center of earth. This concept of the sacred center is sometimes called "the navel of the earth." Zion is sacred as well as the navel of the earth, the point where life emerges, the most life-filled center from which life and God's presence radiate.

By renewing Zion, therefore, the very navel of the earth, the source of life is revitalized and all of the earth is transformed. Understandably then, Jerusalem will be created as a "joy," the joy of all the earth. In that place of joy, God will "rejoice," sing and come alive. Quite a vision!

The vision— healed memories

One feature that is often ignored by interpreters of this passage is the vision of healed memories. The former things will not be remembered or made the focus of our attention, says the prophet. After a history of sins, curses, evils and calamities, the time has come to put the past behind and to look to the future without the burden of the past.

A number of the verses that follow the opening vision of verse 17 focus on the healing of these memories, the reversal of past ills that will bring new peace and joy to life. There will be no

more weeping or cries of distress (verse 19). All the great disasters and curses that provoked cries of despair will be gone ... and no longer part of people's deep pain, their memories.

Given the crimes that humans have committed against creation—pollution, deforestation, nuclear devastation and more—should we be seeking a similar vision? For what kind of transformation of skies and earth do you yearn?

No longer will babies or young people die tragically because of the evils of the world (verse 20). Instead, people will live longer and enjoy life to the full—not just to the traditional old age of 70, but beyond 100.

All of the fields and vineyards that suffered under God's curses and judgments will be rejuvenated (verse 21). Nor will they be frustrated by having enemies come and take the fruit of their labors. All people will enjoy their work and the fruit of their labors (verse 22). They can expect that the children they bear will not be stolen or killed by their foes in some calamity (verse 23). God will bless them with a full life and heal their memories of broken and brutalized lives.

The vision—no violence

The closing image of the prophet's dream is similar to the scene depicting the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah 11:5–9. In the new world, there will be no violence. The prophet's way of emphasizing

Does your community have a way of dealing with past wrongs and evils, even those that occurred in the distant past? Do you have rites of healing of memories, of broken relationships, of broken hearts? Do you have a vision of your congregation being a means of healing the past through Christ, our healer? How does this happen?

Does your community have a location where you feel that God is present, alive, vibrant and full of joy? For the ancient people of Israel that special place was Jerusalem. Is earth the sacred site God has chosen to be the place of life and joy?

this theme is to depict animals, such as the lion and wolf, as friendly to what would naturally be their prey. The peaceful animal kingdom is a metaphor for a peaceful world.

Just as the first verse pointed to a transformation of the physical world, this scene is probably more than a metaphor. The violence that injured the physical world is to be removed. The natural world, too, is to be part of the dream, a realm free from curses and cruelty.

At Christmas this image of a world where humans and animals celebrate “peace on earth,” is sometimes present in manger scenes and elsewhere. Is Christmas our Christian version of this vision?

What kind of vision of non-violence do you think is needed for society and the rest of creation today? How did Jesus promote a similar vision?

What kind of vision of peace do you have? How would you respond if you were in Bethlehem, the home of the peace child Jesus? How can we promote a dream of healing peace and non-violence in our world today?

Where is the vision?

It is both sad and ironic that Jerusalem, the place where the prophet saw this dream fulfilled, is today a place of violence. The peoples of modern Israel and Palestine have no peace, only an endless cycle of violence. And what we see through the media is only the image of violence. Is the vision of the prophet pointless?

First, it needs to be recognized that there are people in both camps working for peace. One such group, Rabbis for Peace, opposes the militant Zionist approach. Similar groups of Christians and Muslims are searching for ways to find justice and peace.

It is hard, of course, to imagine peace when surrounded by war. In March 2002 the Lutheran School in Bethlehem in Palestine was invaded and occupied by Israeli tanks. How would your children feel if their school was being trashed by tanks and soldiers? How would they feel about Jerusalem, a place from which rockets are launched?

Remarkably, the Lutheran pastor of the church and school in Bethlehem has a vision of peace and works to heal memories. When the children return to school, they are urged to focus on peace, not vengeance. Making peace with people in tanks is not easy—unless you have a vision of hope!

Norman Habel

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Revelation 21:1–6

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

How does the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 speak to your longings today?

How can we glimpse signs of God's promises coming to fulfillment in our world? Sometimes hope is difficult to see. Martin Luther King Jr. contrasted the hunger and poverty he saw in the 1960s to the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21:

It's alright to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day.... It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.... This is what we have to do. ("I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1963, Memphis, Tennessee.)

Revelation's vision of the New Jerusalem, of the radiant bridal city with golden street and pearly gate, where death and tears are no more, has given form and voice to the dreams of God's people through the ages. From Augustine's "City of God" to African American spirituals and gospel songs, Revelation's holy city inspires hope for healing and renewal.

On this closing day of the Assembly, we look to the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 as one biblical vision for our future. The holy city coming out of heaven can furnish both critique and hope for our world's cities and communities. New Jerusalem is a vision for our life in God after we die; but it also holds promise for this world, for Jerusalem and other war-torn cities, giving a vision for "what we have to do," in the words of Dr. King.

God's promises fulfilled

Positioned at the end of the book of Revelation, at the end of our Bible, the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 brings to fulfillment a chorus of God's promises—the prophet Isaiah's promise of newness ("I am about to do a new thing," Isa 43:19; and "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," Isa 65:17); prophetic promises of a restoration of Jerusalem or a heavenly Jerusalem; and also Revelation's own promises made to the seven churches in the opening letters of Revelation 2–3.

Belief in a heavenly city of Jerusalem, often personified as a feminine figure or "mother," was widespread in biblical times (see Gal 4:26; Heb 12:26). According to biblical promises, the renewed Jerusalem would be made of precious stones (Isa 54:11–12; Tobit 13:16–17), it would have a magnificent new temple (Ezek 40–48), and it would be "married" to God in a covenant of love (Isa 54:5). Following the destruction of earthly Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, people's longings for a renewed Jerusalem intensified. They longed for a renewal of their city, for a sense of home, for a dwelling with God.

New Jerusalem also fulfills promises introduced in the letters to the seven churches, in order to motivate people to be faithful. Revelation 2–3 promised that we would "eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7) and be granted citizenship in the "city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven" (Rev 3:12). These promises of paradise and citizenship in New Jerusalem now come to fulfillment in the holy city in Revelation 21–22. All the promises of God culminate in this vision.

Say the name of your own town or city out loud. Now re-phrase the vision of New Jerusalem in terms of your own city's renewal: "I saw the holy city, God's New (name of your town) coming down out of heaven...". What would your "new" city look like, envisioned in light of God's vision of hope?

No more mourning, crying, or pain

The opening verses of Revelation 21 and 22 list a series of items that are “no more” in God’s new city—no more sea (Rev 21:1), no more death, mourning, weeping, or pain (Rev 21:4), nothing accursed any more (Rev 22:3), and no more night (Rev 21:25; 22:5). These contrasts underscore the newness of Jerusalem in contrast to Babylon/Rome and everything that has gone before.

The promise of the disappearance of the “sea” reflects not so much a fear or hatred of the ocean, but rather recognition that the Mediterranean Sea was the engine fueling Rome’s global maritime trade, the backbone of the imperial economy (Rev 8:9; 13:1; 18:11–17). In New Jerusalem, trade in luxury goods at the expense of the poor will come to an end.

God’s tabernacling presence (*skene*)

John now sees a magnificent holy city, coming down out of heaven. We are invited to enter and participate in New Jerusalem’s splendid architecture, its beauty, precious stones and waters. God’s city welcomes nations and peoples to enter as citizens and to “inherit” (Rev 21:7) its blessings, where God dwells in their midst.

Revelation 21 fulfills people’s longings for a dwelling with God not with a so-called “rapture” or snatching of Christians up into the air, as some modern-day apocalypticists claim, but rather with God’s descent down to earth. God will take up residence and “dwell” (Greek: *skene*, *skenoo*) with people. This Greek word for “dwelling,” repeated twice as both noun and verb, is the same word as in the Gospel of John (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” Jn 1:14).

The promise of God’s dwelling recalls God’s “tabernacling” with Israel in the wil-

derness following the Exodus, a theme echoed by the prophets (see Ezek 37:27, “My dwelling place shall be with them; I will be their God and they shall be my people;” also Zech 2:10). There will be no temple in God’s new city (Rev 21:22), for the presence of God and the Lamb will be its temple or tabernacle.

God’s voice speaks from the throne to declare that mourning, pain and death will all come to an end in the holy city. The same quote from Isaiah 25 is used in Revelation 7:17 to promise that God will tenderly wipe away all of our tears.

In a daring contrast to the Roman economy, John describes God’s city of justice and well-being as having a gift economy. How does this vision speak to globalization and trade today?

Ecology and economy: water of life “without cost” (*dorean*)

In Revelation 21:5 God speaks directly from the throne for the first time since Revelation 1:8, declaring all things new. In one of the most magnificent promises of the entire book of Revelation, God offers the water of life to everyone who thirsts. The promise of water “without cost” (*dorean*) is reiterated in Revelation 22:17: “And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” These verses echo the promise of Isaiah 55:1

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

God’s invitation to drink from the “springs” of the water of the water of life

How does this proclamation of God’s dwelling on earth, with us, speak to your community today? Where would God dwell in your place? What tears will God wipe away?

in New Jerusalem is healing imagery, contrasting to the deadly “springs” of water that turned to blood and became undrinkable in Revelation 16:4. Also as a healing contrast to the exploitative economy of Babylon/Rome, New Jerusalem offers water and other essentials of life to everyone “without cost.” The Greek word *dorean* (“without cost,” “without money”) underscores the promise of participation even for those who have no money.

Where is the water of life today? New Jerusalem’s promise of access to pure, living water for everyone can also offer a prophetic critique of our damage to aquifers and rivers, a reminder of the preciousness of water in the ecology of life. In some parts of Africa, people must walk long distances for clean drinking water. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, foreign-owned corporations control access to water and water is becoming unaffordable. In North America, aquifers are being depleted by irrigation and mining. In Palestine, water scarcity is exacerbated by occupation. Water wars threaten our world, raising issues of privatization, inequitable allocation of resources and international borders. The “living waters” of Revelation speak not just to spiritual or theological waters, but also to real waters.

Earthly Jerusalem

God’s vision for a new Jerusalem turns our vision also to the present-day Jerusalem. The situation in today’s *earthly* Jerusalem, closed off to most Palestinian Christians and Muslims since 1967, makes the longing for the holy city expressed in Revelation 21 especially poignant. What is God’s vision for this holy city today?

With Israel’s annexation of the entire city in 1967, Jews now have access to their holiest sites. Yet Jerusalem is holy to people of three faiths—to Jews, Christians and Muslims—and all of these people long for access to the holy city.

In the city of Jerusalem, and in every war-torn city where people search for signs of hope for a future, God’s vision of a new Jerusalem can expose injustice and nurture the promise of renewal of life in God’s *polis*.

Alpha and omega, the beginning and the end

The “Alpha and Omega” of Revelation 21:6 (see also Rev 1:8) promise that God is with us from “A to Z,” through every ending and every beginning. For first-century readers living in the seven cities, Revelation’s proclamation of an “end” referred not so much to the end of the world as to the end of Roman rule, a critique of Rome’s own claims that it would rule “forever” (slogans such as “*Roma Aeterna*”). Similarly today, in situations of oppression and injustice, Revelation’s promise of an “end” is heard as good news.

When glimpses of New Jerusalem seem most impossible, when the river of life seems all dried up, Revelation invites us to taste and see God’s promises in Word and sacrament. Revelation is framed in liturgy and song. As we await the fulfillment of God’s promises, eating and drinking at the eucharistic table transport us in some measure into God’s holy city, to taste the life-giving water flowing already from God’s throne. “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

Barbara Rossing

What is the watershed in which you live? What is the water of life for which you are thirsty? How does the invitation to receive the water “without cost” speak to your local ecology and economy?

Part III: Village Groups

As you study and discuss each of the following chapters, consider what is most important for the LWF as a communion of churches to be *saying* and *doing* in this area.

(Share your proposals with your church's Assembly delegates and/or with the Assembly Content Coordinator: kbl@lutheranworld.org)



A. God's Healing Gift of Justification



With the signing of the Joint Declaration, renewed ecumenical attention is being given to the doctrine of justification. What is the relationship between justification, healing and “new creation”? In what ways is salvation as forgiveness of sin, liberation from bondage and spiritual healing especially needed today? How does this speak to people’s deepest spiritual yearnings? What difference do factors such as context and gender make? How can congregations proclaim and live this out more fully?

Is it worth it?

We may wonder about the reason for living, about the worth of it all—when standing at the grave of a loved one or when working the fields under a scorching sun, when we have lost a job, or are ravaged by disease. The question can emerge with a groan from the bottom of our conflicted soul, with any breath that we take, any birthday that we celebrate, any time our stomachs growl with emptiness, or when faced with tragic sights such as children scavenging through rubbish.

The question surfaces with a new impetus in the face of the tremendous contrasts separating people on our planet. To be able to consume, to carry on a lifestyle

in tune with the latest trends, to enjoy leisure time with loved ones, even to have a meal a day, becomes a great question mark in the ocean of poverty in which we live. Economic crises can make it feel as if the bottom had dropped out of everything. Those of us who are excluded have lost any hope, any foothold even to ask the question: Are we worthy of anything? The question is always there; it must be seized, articulated, freed from the drowsiness of our poverty and illusions of our wealth.

What happens when that question arises? Will we be able to patch up the gorge or mend the rift that opens up? Are we able to stabilize the quake it unleashes? When things begin to open, break, shake and slide, what do we hold on to? We can become incredibly destructive when no answer looms on the horizon. We begin destroying first ourselves, then the neighbor and finally nature. Or it may be the other way around. The illusion of seeking worth by destroying the “other” is a constant theme in the human drama.

How does this question of the worth of living arise in your life or context?

The message of justification

In the face of questions such as these, the Lutheran tradition has always held fast to the testimony of God’s saving action in Christ, usually referred to as justification by grace through faith. Luther spoke of this doctrine as the article by which the church stands or falls. It carried a vibrant message for a world on the brink of collapse. But, today, when

How has the message of justification spoken, or not spoken, to you?

our churches speak of justification, it is often merely a dull drone. People who still listen to the church and its sermons wonder: What do we have to be justified **from** or **for**? They do not necessarily expect that the doctrine of justification will answer all the questions that trouble them, but the way in which we speak of justification may not even come close answering the most basic question: Is it worth it? The answer of justification by grace through faith seems to come “out of the blue,” an unsolicited answer to a nonexistent question, a piece of history with no anchor in our present.

The rich message of this doctrine flourishes when addressed to our human struggles to live faithfully—from the doubts that crop up in the light of modern biotechnologies, to the wounds that we have inflicted on the mountains, forests, rivers and seas, to the hurt of hunger and unemployment, to the increasing doubts about our place in a globalized economy which exalts the successful instead of rescuing the failing. The many concerns that we hear daily on the radio, TV, or in casual conversations are undergirded by questions that strip naked the human venture: What are we doing? What gives us the right to do so? How far should we go? Why is this happening to us?

The doctrine of justification points us toward an answer that has to come from somewhere else. As a community of faith, can we grasp the powerful yet hidden presence of God in the midst of all this? This requires us to give a name to the modern crosses that we experience. For it is at the foot of the cross that the message of justification becomes meaningful.

The question about God and salvation undergirds our different experiences in today’s pluralized world. God is the Redeemer as well as the Creator and Sanctifier of life. As Luther knew, the experience of God conceals itself in and through other experiences, in what ap-

appears as the opposite of God's majesty and glory. This means that God can speak to us amid doubts about the "truth" of our faith, in our loneliness, in our despair over a broken marriage, when we feel impotent in the face of powerful economic forces, when we lack self-esteem, in our frustration with an unfaithful church. These moments and places can open up space where God is acting and make us participants in God's own creation. God is present particularly there where creation hurts most. Suffering is a sign that healing is required, not a temporary cure, but the everlasting healing of God's gracious presence.

How can we raise our questions from these places that hurt the most, from these experiences that seem pointless, from these moments in which we have felt worthless, from the turbulence of our lives shattered by forces beyond our responsibility and control? Some of us may conceal these experiences out of shame or fear; others may embrace today's popular causes in order to gain some prestige, or to placate the guilt about how we live. Still others may honestly recognize and face the wounds in their lives and in the lives of those around them, yet expect to be quickly restored and "propped up" so as to continue enjoying a full and rich life. The question is whether we are willing to let God touch us in the core of our being, in the marrow of our bones, in the shadows of our minds and crevices of our feelings, in the web of our relationships.

Share with each other how these kinds of questions emerge for you.

To be healed is nothing less than letting Christ take shape in and among us. It is letting the Holy Spirit enter our lives, healing all that hinders us from being whole, integral and grateful creatures of our Creator. This is another way of talking about the core of the gospel,

namely, that God sets creation aright in Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of all creation. To speak openly of what needs to be set aright gives a clearer picture of what God intends for creation. To do so, our language about justification needs to be transformed or healed.

Transforming our understandings of justification

The way in which the doctrine of justification has usually been formulated has been blamed for many things: from being an outdated formulation intelligible only to medieval Christians to an open apology for doing nothing; from being a dead symbol to promoting spiritual apartheid from other faiths; from unilaterally reducing the biblical richness to being oblivious to worldly issues.

There is some truth to these allegations, caused in part by shortcomings in the witness of the Lutheran churches. For example, in Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounced a pseudo-Lutheranism that preached forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptized without regard to discipline and distributed communion without confession of sin. He called this a "cheap grace," a grace without discipleship, without the cross, a grace without Jesus Christ, the source of grace. The corollary was that the central and liberating message of the Reformation—the justification of the sinner—degenerated into the justification of sin and the fallen world with all its injustices. Costly grace without discipleship equals cheap grace.¹

With this type of critique came the renewed realization that the central tenet of the Reformation contains the heart of what Christianity is all about. In the Joint Declaration this has now been affirmed by both Lutherans and Roman

Catholics. Bonhoeffer insisted that the problem is not the doctrinal formulation as such, which is a radical formulation that goes to the core of our relationship with God. Rather, the problem is in us, in the tricks we play to make God's saving act in Christ as innocuous as possible. For example, we subtract from the reality of justification our vital involvement in what God is doing. It is as if we wanted to be varnished with a declaration, but not transformed by an incarnation. Fortunately, we have learned that the doctrine of justification does not excuse us from actively following Christ. Discipleship is an integral dimension of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Grace and discipleship belong to the very dynamism of God's triune life.

Bonhoeffer's criticism raises a further question. Are our difficulties with the doctrine of justification due to Lutheran attempts to sever every conceivable connection between creation, good works and salvation? Why this obsession? Why divorce discipleship from its vital connection with God's saving action? Justification often appears as a boulder crushing everything beneath it. So much weight has been put on the formula that we have forgotten what it stood for, and the spirit and ethos that it once expressed. The issue at stake is not the technical language of justification, but the matter to which it points. The doctrine of justification is just one way of expounding on the central theme of the New Testament—God's saving work in Jesus Christ.²

In what other ways would you talk about the significance of God's saving action in Christ?

The doctrine of justification must be expanded if we are to appreciate, for example, how the praxis of Christians is relevant for society and for God's plans for the world. Caring for creation is also car-

ing for God's reign. This need for more expansive, social understandings of justification is reflected in efforts to join it with other terms—justification **and** justice, justification **and** sanctification, justification **and** liberation, justification **and** creation, and in this Assembly, justification **and** healing. A dry forensic language is not sufficient for speaking about God's love and concern for creation. These conjunctions provide some relevance to the doctrine, connecting it with other experiences. The "and" has become as critical as the doctrine itself. It opens the window for spelling out what justification means for our lives and the life of the whole creation. Further, this suggests how our lives should be transparent to the message of justification. Once the language of justification is thus relocated, it begins to disclose that which did not seem to be there before.

Luther's own theological thinking never collapsed under the solitary weight of the doctrine of justification. His rich biblical perspective was more holistic. Justification was employed as the indicative voice of what God has done for us through Christ: God has made us participants in Christ's righteousness.³ The doctrine of justification was a means of expressing that the Word comes **from** God, and is more than a word **about** God.⁴ Luther was able to put such an emphasis on justification because it was central to a radical re-conception of God and God's intimate involvement with creation. Luther's formulation of the theology of the cross, which stands at the center of his understanding of the Trinity, is what gives such power to our justification in Christ.

Our participation in this Word, through faith, places us ecstatically "in Christ."⁵ This holistic and trinitarian understanding contrasts with a classical Lutheran forensic interpretation. Through faith, believers receive Christ and his work, and not primarily some

convictions, beliefs or assertions about God and salvation. (These, however, are present in how we understand the nature of faith.) In other words, faith signifies an entire life that is oriented and accompanied by the Holy Spirit. The faith that justifies unites us in such a manner to Christ that we can no longer speak of salvation or justification as our own achievement. As Paul reminds us, “it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Our good works, therefore, are not “ours”; they belong to God. They are part and parcel of what God does in the world for the benefit of God’s creation. This is the most radical assault on the claim to private property, in this case, the private property of one’s own works. Justification “raptures” us from the clouds of our own “righteousness” into the only real world that God has made for us (see the Bible studies from Revelation). Created life itself is given back to us as a total gift, not as a toiling burden. In this sense, faith in creation is restored and creation is delivered from its bondage and wounds.⁶

The doctrine of justification conveys the Word **from** God rather than **about** God. Thus, it depends on a triune perspective of God’s being and action, as well as on a view of creation that sees it as the future abode or dwelling place for God in communion with all of God’s creatures.⁷ In this way, justification becomes a powerful message that transforms lives. Further, it opens up our experiences and engagements as places that “are worth it,” places claimed by the sacred for our life in the world. The doctrine of justification is located within the triune dynamism that makes God “God.” Otherwise, we may correctly repeat the classical and orthodox formulation, but at the cost of cheapening the costly grace signified by Christ’s incarnation. Whatever leads to a cheapening of this grace needs to be rectified or healed.

How do you respond to these understandings of justification that pertain to all of creation, and not only individual sinners?

Helsinki, the Joint Declaration and the voices of plurality and contextuality

This “healing” is an important aspect of today’s debate, which is not about whether justification is central, but how it is relevant in daily lives. Not only Lutherans but also our ecumenical partners will reflect on the nature and scope of this doctrine. The signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic Church and the LWF stands as a critical milestone in the ecumenical world. It has spurred a renewed discussion about the relevance and implications of this doctrine within and among these and other churches. A main objective of this Declaration was to state officially that the sixteenth-century doctrinal condemnations in the area of justification no longer apply to the teaching of the two partners. But, the *Official Common Statement* also calls for ongoing attempts to

interpret the message of justification in language relevant for human beings today...with reference both to individual and social concerns of our times.⁸

This is an important item on the ecumenical agenda. As Lutherans, we have much to contribute here because of how we have struggled deeply with this issue in our history. The 1963 LWF Assembly in Helsinki, for instance, attempted to re-examine, re-formulate and restate the doctrine of justification in relation to the experience of “modern man” [*sic*] in a secularized world. At the time, the document “Christ Today” was associated with a



passionate debate over different interpretations of the doctrine and its relevance for that time. Instead of being adopted, this document was received and sent to the Commission on Theology for further consideration, formulation and publication, which occurred a year later, under the title “Justification Today.”

The debate at Helsinki set forth the basic agreement among Lutheran churches on the centrality of justification.⁹ At the same time, it revealed the difficulties in defining the modern experience and its relation to the message of justification. No agreement could be reached on a common language that would speak to the hearts and minds of “the man [*sic*] of today.” One problem

was that this “man” [*sic*] was defined in a thoroughly Western and male-centered way, which spoke only to some parts of the LWF. A second problem was that neither contextuality nor plurality were sufficiently recognized as a dynamic component of the theological reflection.

The Helsinki Assembly signaled the beginning of a paradigm shift, of a widening search for language relevant to contemporary experience. Furthermore, it encouraged other Lutheran voices, particularly from the South, to introduce social-analytical tools for discerning the experiences that had to be critically correlated with the doctrine of justification. The emphasis was not only placed on discerning the preconceptions that we bring to the interpretation of the doctrine, but also on clarifying the different social locations and experiences from which different interpretations arise and to which they must speak. These were the first signs of a genuine pluralism and a wider comprehension of the human situation and predicament. In the ongoing process of LWF theological reflection¹⁰ after Helsinki, the traditional “sages” of Western academia, with their particular understanding of the human experience, began to be considered as **one** voice among many.

One of the new vistas opened up at Helsinki was pursued in the 1960s and 1970s through the LWF study of the relation of justification and justice in relation to the doctrine of the two kingdoms. In the 1980s and 1990s more explicit attempts were made to link God’s justification and the pursuit of justice. The meaning of justification was discussed in different social and economic contexts. The encounter in Brazil in 1988, published under the title *Rethinking Luther’s Theology in the Context of the Third World*, was a visible attempt to connect justification and justice, taking seriously the contextuality of any theological interpretation. Similar efforts were reflected in a seminar held in connection with the

1992 LWF Council, published under the title *Justification and Justice*.

This theme was picked up again at a consultation held in 1998 in Wittenberg, Germany, under the title, “Justification in the World’s Contexts.” Here there was a clearer focus on the plurality of experiences that include, yet go beyond, the socio-economic aspect. The aim of the diverse presentations was to examine the meaning of justification today in the light of our globalized and plural experiences and societies.

Most recently, the LWF’s concern to explore further the distinct and contextual understandings of justification was pursued at an ecumenical symposium held in 2002 in Dubuque, Iowa (USA). This was an intentional follow-up to the recommendations of the *Joint Declaration*, which called not only for a relevant interpretation of the doctrine, but to relate it to the individual as well as the social concerns of our times. Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians, as well as those from other traditions, together probed key hermeneutical, theological, anthropological, ethical and ecclesial challenges today. Among the participants, the social-cultural differences tended to be more significant than the confessional ones.

In sum, the reception of the *Joint Declaration* in different contexts and ecumenically must be seen as critical developments after Helsinki. It has also been a time for identifying the critical fields and tension points of justification with regard to the personal experience and social realities of today. Between 1963 and today there have been two simultaneous trends. On the one hand, interest in the doctrine of justification has widened, not only among Lutherans, but ecumenically. This has uncovered problems inherent in the formulation of the doctrine as such. On the other hand, there has been increasing pluralism in the socio-ethical consequences to be drawn from the doctrine of justification.¹¹ The tension is not

over whether theology should be contextual, for this is the only relevant way in which theology can be cast today if it is to be significant. Rather, the tension is over different understandings of what the “context” is all about. Contexts are always socially construed and respond to different understandings of what are the central issues.¹² In sum, we have come to understand that our experiences are plural, and that therefore the places from which we understand the meaning of justification vary.

Diversity is the threshold for new vistas and understandings. Through this plurality we can reach new consensus over the healing dimension of justification by grace through faith. The concerns arising from different contexts are tied to the central core of the Lutheran tradition. We may disagree about the appropriateness of juridical and forensic language, we may quarrel about the demands of the medieval situation compared with our time, we may even doubt why we should keep the traditional formula. What is clear, despite our differences, is that the doctrine of justification underscores the unmerited salvation, restoration and healing of the human condition. In other words, it makes of us worthy people living in a worthy environment.

What different contextual understandings of justification are present in your group?

Justification and healing

Exploring new language appropriate for new contexts is a faithful way of pursuing the central Lutheran concern to interpret the gospel. This Assembly is taking an important step forward in relating the gospel to the theme of healing. “Healing” helps to bring out important dimensions of salvation and God’s other actions that traditional language has tended to leave out—the whole bodily

and spiritual reality of persons and their relationships in the world and with all of creation. God's saving action involves wholeness and healing; it is the means through which we receive God's healing.

What can we as a Lutheran communion say today about the meaning of justification? How does it to help give us a new understanding of the "worthiness" of our struggles or relationships with one another and creation?

Luther himself used language of healing in relationship to justification, in discussing the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk10:29–37). In the parable's vivid bodily references, Luther saw the nature of God's saving activity in Christ: God becomes our neighbor. The wounded man is reborn through the gratuitous help of the Samaritan (Christ), who takes up his wounded and hopeless situation. The wounded man represents humanity in general, and Christians in particular. "To be justified" becomes practically synonymous with "to be healed." Luther writes, "Everyone who believes in Christ is righteous, not yet fully in point of fact (*in re*), but in hope (*in spe*)." The Christian "has begun to be justified and healed (*sanari*), like the man who was half-dead (*semivivus*)."¹³

Further, for Luther this new work of creation, this healing of the wounded, will be completed in the coming of God's kingdom. In this life, we may not see magical cures or a complete healing of our bodies. Our skin still wrinkles, our flesh hangs ever more loosely on our frames, our eyesight eventually begins to fade. But, it is the promise of the physician that already initiates in us a process of healing.¹⁴ To be justified in Christ, to participate in God's righteousness, is something we await to occur fully at the end of time. God gives us anticipations of this "new" time, even in the present. We are beginning to experience a process of healing. For Luther

this healing begins in the church as a "hospital," where the Spirit daily cleanses our wounds.¹⁵

Relating justification to healing helps to correct how we understand, speak and live our lives as Christians. It corrects a subjectivist, private and anthropocentric understanding of salvation. Traditionally, the doctrine has referred to our terrors of conscience, our desire to be included and accepted, our need to be forgiven, our longing to have a new spiritual beginning. Today, these are still critical ways in which the word of justification comes as the only balm that enables us to keep on living.

While these continue to be constants in the human situation, our spectrum of experiences has widened considerably. Our knowledge and self-understandings have expanded and undergone significant shifts. "Conscience" has acquired more integral connotations.

- As a species we have new awareness of the ways in which all existing matter and energy participate in a common field-force:
- The inextricable link of our minds and bodies with the rest of nature.
- The different levels which compose our identity, which are deeply rooted in the unconscious.
- The complex ways in which sexual and gender identity is lived out.
- The intricate way in which power flows, either lifting people up or excluding them.
- How socio-political and economic systems are part of and impacted by the larger self-regulating biophysical environment.

Our contemporary experiences and sensitivities shape a new set of questions re-

The scalpel that cuts the flesh to remove disease from within our body, the hospital that nurses us back to health, the drill that excises the decay to restore our teeth, the psychiatrist who walks our mental labyrinths with us, the scientist who seeks new ways to improve life—all indeed are signs of the full healing we await. When lives are set aright they appear as signs of the fullness of life promised to us in Christ.

garding the scope of the healing that we await. Indeed, the healing that we seek and need, the healing that makes everything worthy, is increasingly perceived as communal, ecological and systemic. Such a sensitivity is not foreign to central Christian symbols. As the Spirit of God weaves the whole of creation, healing is that openness to the Spirit that makes us share and partake in the whole. From a Christian point of view, nothing can be really healed if it is not received as a gift from the divine love that has created everything. To be healed is to receive and to participate, to stand and to follow, to await and to pursue. It is to become an integral and responsible member of this circuitry or web that sustains us.

The Holy Spirit heals through these means, reminding us that our lives are worthy. But, bodily or psychological healing without the promise of God's final healing for us and all of creation is like an oar without a boat. Our partial healings are important signs of God's benevolence acquiring their full significance in the light of what God intends to do with the whole of creation (see the Bible study on Romans 8). The healing we receive through the means at God's disposal—through other human beings, institutions, plants and minerals, art and literature, stories and lore—are means by which God makes us integral and wholesome participants in God's creation. God constantly surprises us by the new ways through which this healing work is carried on.

It follows that a life renewed by God is a life lived in responsible and caring relationships with other human beings and the rest of creation. We are called to do so

through the institutions, systems, policies and alliances that shape our lives. No place is exempt from this renewed living that we receive through what God does for us. We must continually struggle with the tendency to withdraw into ourselves and to challenge the different criteria by which worthiness and status are determined in this world. We are transformed in the midst of our struggle with those forces that oppose renewal. Yet, in spite of hardships and failures, our existence, struggles and commitments are worthy because of what happened to and through the wounded one on the cross.

Justification as healing occurs as *koinonia* or *communio* among human beings and with all creatures. In confessing Christ as the foundation and Savior of the world, the healing that we receive can never become something that we possess, a cure that we have achieved, a good that we own. It opens us up to others, connects with our social and natural environments. Furthermore, we receive God's blessings through a renewed creation, which becomes our real place of belonging. There may be truth in some modern techniques of self-cure and self-help, but they are also plagued by the illusion that one is the maker of one's salvation, that we can live whole and integral lives apart from others and against nature. We are promised instead a healing of the whole, not just a temporary relief of its parts.

A Lutheran understanding of the sacraments reminds us of the nature of the healing we proclaim. The sacraments convey that we are true creatures to the

How is justification healing for you?

extent that we constantly receive our being anew from outside, from the wholesome presence of the Spirit. Created elements become means of grace. The community that the sacrament of Holy Communion creates, as we symbolically share the same cup and bread, signifies that everything we are and possess belong to the other. It also speaks about the object of this grace. Life eternal is promised not to a part, but to the **whole of us**—to all the relationships that knit together our bodies, minds and lives. We cannot be healed if these relationships are not healed. Other human beings, families, friendships, economic systems, the woods, rivers, oceans and mountains which surround us—all are intrinsic to what we are and will be.

So, is living worth our while? The doctrine of justification points to the basic answer. It knits together the symbols by which our worth is settled once and for all. God participates integrally in creation through the cross and is totally committed to our world. God becomes especially present in the meanest, lowest and most marginalized corners of creation. Indeed, it is from this cross that we learn that God is truly the Creator and Redeemer of

the world, because if this wounded man is declared worthy, then our wounds, our separations, our sins can be healed, breeched, forgiven. Indeed only a marginalized God can save us, only a wounded God can heal.¹⁶

We do not achieve our worthiness through what we do nor through the institutions that we create, or even through our churches. But, we live out our worthiness in all of these places. Furthermore, we are also affirmed as worthy people of God through the healing that God effects in and through us. A right relationship is worthy, a healthy engagement with nature is worthy, development that refuses to condemn anyone to poverty is worthy, research into new cures is worthy, the liberation of women is worthy, the struggle against exclusion from socio-political decisions is worthy, sound ecological policies are worthy, a peaceful and safe environment within a family is worthy. They are worthy because through these God weaves a wholesome creation. The declaration of worthiness is the chance to receive our created life as a sheer gift, as a promise of wholeness, as a place for the beginning of the fulfillment promised in Christ.

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What questions does this raise for you? How can the church proclaim and live this out more fully?

Notes

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 53, 57.

² There are other ways in which the truth and reality of justification can be lived and asserted today apart from this doctrine. Furthermore, in some catechetical or worship contexts, insisting on the language of justification may cause more harm than good to the cause of the gospel. The doctrine of justification is better served and honored when it is regarded as a “rule” to guide Christian speech and action. As formulated from Paul onwards, it is a critical guide for understanding how the human condition, creation and God are related. Justification insists that salvation not be understood as a badge, medal or prize, but as the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit in the person of the Son.

³ This is one of the most important aspects of Luther’s rediscovery of justification. Theologians often point to the historical data this contains, but forget the theological assertion that Luther sets forward.

⁴ See Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 68.

⁵ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 215f. He follows the Finnish Luther research interpretation, especially by T. Mannermaa.

⁶ See Forde, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 73.

⁷ Luther’s understanding of baptism as the promise and realization of new creation clearly points in this direction. See Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther’s Concept of*

the Holy Spirit (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), pp. 145–146.

⁸ The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI.; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 42.

⁹ One should note that the whole study on justification was prompted by a previous study of the Commission on Theology directed by Vilmos Vajta, entitled “The Church and the Confessions: The Role of the Confessions in the Life and Doctrine of the Lutheran Churches.” The research questioned the relevance that the doctrine of justification had for the teaching and practice of the churches of the time. See Jens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari, Normal A. Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 377.

¹⁰ Cf. Vitor Westhelle, “And the Walls Come Tumbling Down: Globalization and Fragmentation in the LWF,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 36/1 (Winter 1997).

¹¹ See Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Justification in the World’s Context, LWF Documentation 47* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2000), p. 11.

¹² But it is also true that often the context may acquire a normative status of its own to which the doctrine of justification then is accommodated and sometimes violated.

¹³ *LW* 27:227; *WA* 2:495. Luther shows a continuity of this image as we can see in writings from 1516 through 1546.

¹⁴ See WA 56:272; "Martin Luther's Lectures on Romans," Wilhelm Pauck (ed.), *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 15 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 127.

¹⁵ See Luther's last sermon in Wittenberg on Romans 12:3 (January 17, 1546): "If Christ, the Samaritan, had not come, we should all have had to die. He it is who binds our wounds, carries us into the church and is now healing us. So we are now under the Physician's care. The sin, it is true, is wholly

forgiven, but it has not been wholly purged. If the Holy Spirit is not ruling men, they become corrupt again; but the Holy Spirit must cleanse the wounds daily. Therefore this life is a hospital; the sin has really been forgiven, but it has not yet been healed." LW 51:373; WA 51:124.

¹⁶ Cf. Marcella Althaus-Reid, "The Divine Exodus of God: Involuntary Marginalized, Taking an Option for the Poor, or Truly Marginal?," *Concilium* 2001/1, pp. 27–33.

B. God's Healing Gift of Communion



The communion we share as Lutherans is God's gift for the sake of the world. The healing power of prayer and the Eucharist transform us into a communion of love. Yet, within this communion of churches, there still are significant differences and wounds, related to significant historical struggles and political changes (e.g., the end of Communism or apartheid), generational and theological differences (e.g., who can be ordained), ethnic or cultural identities and disparities in size and finances. Where are forgiveness, healing and reconciliation especially needed in this communion? How can communication support and build up the communion, for the sake of the world?

A communion

Since the Lutheran World Federation was established in 1947 it has undergone transformation in its self-understanding. This transformation has gone hand in hand with a confessional and spiritual bonding that has taken place among the member churches, as a result of their working together within the framework of LWF, and in relationship to the wider ecumenical developments.

To what extent have we, as a communion, experienced a healing process in the form of physical, theological and spiritual transformation during our life and work together? How does being a communion have the potential to bring healing to the churches, as well as to the world? From the perspective of our different constituencies, how do we understand healing in the first place? How does the theme of this Assembly challenge us to look into different dimensions of healing, some of which we may have neglected? (see the chapter on “The Church’s Ministry of Healing”) What possibilities do the concept and positive experience of being a communion of churches hold for the new challenges and problems we experience together? (see the chapter on “Transforming Economic Globalization”) In what other ways is communion proving to be a viable concept? On what new directions and implications of being a communion should the LWF focus?

For many decades, the LWF understood itself as a free association of churches carefully respecting the autonomy and integrity of the member churches. The problem that surfaced was how to couch the free association concept in theological terms. Theological studies, along with the spiritual affinity and trust that developed over the years, led to a searching for a much more focused self-definition. For many years, particularly during the 1980s, more specific attention was given to whether the LWF was not something much more than a bureaucratic arm of the member churches, which “free association” implied. Did the LWF have a church character or not? If so, how and to what extent?

It was in the context of this search that the theological concept of communion emerged. Communion is not a new concept, but is a part of the biblical and confessional traditions of the church. The Apostle Paul, for one, uses its Greek original, *koinonia*, thirteen times. It is also translated with other words, depending on the context.¹

What was new about the word “communion” was its use in the self-understanding of the LWF. This generated theological discussion and research in order to address the questions and issues at stake.² Communion implies pulpit and altar fellowship and mutual recognition of

ministries, but in some places even this minimal understanding of what it means to be a communion is not practiced. Furthermore, communion must go deeper into other forms of sharing and solidarity.

In seeking to define theologically and structurally the nature of unity sought in the bilateral confessional talks, the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC also explored the possibilities offered by the concept of communion. Communion was seen to be less ambiguous and with richer theological content than the over-used concept of unity, which can also be applied to the socio-political arena.³ It is within this wider ecumenical understanding of *communio* that the LWF understands itself as a communion.

Even though the subject of communion was discussed during the deliberations of the 1984 LWF Assembly in Budapest, the communion terminology was not adopted as a constitutional formula of self-understanding. It was not until the 1990 Curitiba Assembly that “free association” of churches was replaced with “communion” of churches in the LWF Constitution (para. III). This self-understanding was further elaborated on in the Assembly Message with words such as “spiritual,” “sacramental,” “confessional,” “witnessing” and “serving.”⁴

Since then, the practical meaning and full implications of being a communion

have continued to be debated. They were perceived and experienced differently within the LWF constituency, and muted reservations have persisted, particularly in some large churches of the North. After all these years of discussing the concept of communion, it is important that this Assembly clarify where we are today in understanding and living out what it means to be a communion.

The title of this Village Group suggests that our life in communion is God's healing gift. It is this not only in the sense that life in communion comes with the gift of salvation, but also because this old, biblical term has become a fresh means to help Lutheran churches understand who they are jointly and individually.

The linkage between the concepts of communion and healing breaks new ground in the mainstream Lutheran tradition, in both theological and practical ways. While healing is a commonly used metaphor that points to the process of renewal, restoration and transformation, its basic literal meaning, particularly as found in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, is also suggested by the overall theme of this Assembly.

Healing in our experiences as a communion

Participation of member churches in the LWF

As a result of the constitutional amendments adopted at the Eighth Assembly, there has been a wider and deeper participation of member churches in the various units of the LWF. The extent of this participation does not usually depend on the size or location of the member churches, or on their financial contribution toward the operational budget of the LWF. As a result, the LWF is no longer a benevolent Lutheran body dominated by European

and American churches of the North, and in which churches of the South are merely accommodated, if not tolerated.

Furthermore, there is a growing sense of shared responsibility. The "business" of the LWF no longer takes place only in Geneva. Considerable investment and efforts have been made to develop and support the regions which now share some of the responsibilities. The aim has been to bring the work of the LWF closer to the level and experience of its member churches. This has also resulted in the regions being the place where a lively and deepened sense of what it means to be a communion is especially manifest, for example, in Africa and Latin America. As one African church leader put it, "We have a real feeling of being a communion—knowing each other and not just knowing churches abroad." A foundation of communion relationships based on trust, rather than on material circumstances or church background, has been established. Continuing efforts needed in this area will be considered later.

Discuss how this has, or has not, been your church's experience and perception. Do you agree with this assessment?

Creative listening to one another

This listening is taking place in the context of reports, applications for grants, deliberations on issues, sharing of insights and differing viewpoints during various LWF forums. Creative listening here means opening up and looking beyond oneself in order to hear all the concerns and cries of the other. It is more than an auditory exercise.

Part of what a relationship of love involves—which is at the heart of communion—is opening oneself up to others and to what is necessary in a given situation. This entails making oneself vulnerable, sometimes to the point of experiencing and en-

during the pain of being criticized or seemingly ignored. We then become vulnerable without feeling threatened by others.

At the relational level, this is what it means to take up one's cross and to follow Jesus. What we need to hear does not always come in pleasant tones and substance. The imperative of listening exacts its dues. A relationship of mutual listening is based on the dynamics of love and trust, rather than on the assumption of trying to change the other.

There is a sense in which listening is an active service of love. It goes beyond the passive openness of a listening ear. The deepest level of communication takes place in the life of communion, where the gap between speaker and hearer is bridged by the imperative of this mutual existence. In listening to one another in this manner, we grow together, minimizing our weaknesses and maximizing our strengths. We ourselves experience healing, and hopefully also become a more healing Lutheran communion.

In what kinds of situations has this listening been especially important? Where is it especially needed in the Lutheran communion today? How can communication technologies and resources assist in this?

Sharing resources

This is taking place through,

- LWF programs: The level of sharing of resources in the form of the exchange of persons, scholarship grants, development aid and theological perspectives has been deepened. There has been an exchange of persons and ideas not only between churches of the North and South, but also between South and South and between North and North.
- Bilateral programs of companionship and partnership: These are car-

ried out through partnership and companionship programs of member churches. Ideally, the parties involved are free to negotiate the details of how they will interact and cooperate. The programs cover a wide range of areas, such as development aid, joint projects, group visits and advocacy for justice and peace.

- Volunteer programs: Persons volunteer to offer their services at no cost to another church for a specific period or a particular project. For example, church-based teams under the auspices of organizations such as *Habitat for Humanity International*, and in cooperation with the local church, have built simple, affordable houses in poor neighborhoods in partnership with those in need of adequate shelter. In one case, they have built and helped staff a whole university.
- Leadership summits: There have also been bilateral and multilateral leadership summits wherein bishops/presidents and other leaders (including women and youth) of member churches exchange experiences garnered from their sphere of service. Through them, leaders have learned that what they, for example, think are unique problems in their particular church are actually problems that transcend particular contexts and may be rooted in human nature.

As helpful as these bilateral relationships are, do they sometimes operate in ways that are paternalistic or work at cross purposes with the multilateral relationships of the communion? If so, how can this be changed?

New experiences of worship life

Within the communion, there has been a considerable exchange of liturgical and musical traditions and resources. Liturgical renewal has been experienced among many member churches, and in recent decades, a rediscovery of worship as the power engine of life in communion.⁵

It now is common among many churches to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion every Sunday and in some, even during the week. The sacramental aspects and impact of worship are more deeply appreciated and celebrated. In, with and under the liturgical acts of prayer, singing and bodily gestures, people have experienced what it means to be one, and to be together with one another in the Lord, across linguistic and cultural barriers. The visible, human and corporate act of worship provides the setting for God's healing presence.

The ecumenical charismatic movement has also affected the Lutheran churches. In the context of worship, some churches have experienced manifestations of the spiritual gifts of powerful preaching, teaching and the physical healing of diseases. Usually this is accompanied by large numbers of people attending Sunday and other services, since the worship service is viewed as mediating the experience of healing.⁶

The Lutheran sense that the sermon is the central point of worship should also be understood to mean that through proclamation, God's active Word breaks through and permeates all parts of worship, whether through words, silence or the simple, bodily language of liturgical gestures. Where two or three are gathered in the Lord's Name, God is at work through them to plan and to bring to effect what is pleasing to God (Mt 18:20; Phil 2:13). This happens not only during the sermon or homily. The whole service becomes the drama and the environment

of the healing activity of God's Word among God's people.

Although Lutheran theology emphasizes the Word, we must be aware of the danger of considering words as the sole medium through which we interact with God. This can result in an idolatry of words. As Elizabeth Templeton reminds us, when words get in the way of people's silent encounter with God in worship, they can become demonic. Sharing with those who cannot hear or speak the experience of the presence of God in worship is part of inclusive worship.⁷ Therefore, we must learn to be open to this further dimension of worship, which lies beyond the cacophony of words, and wherein we become truly "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Worship furthermore provides the theological underpinnings and social framework for serving and healing the world. That happens when worship is allowed to remind us of those who are not there, but who should be there, namely the rest of the world.

How has your worship life been enriched or renewed through the sharing of liturgical resources or practices from other churches?

Communion as a means for healing the world

Through service in the world: Through financial grants and seconded personnel, member churches, particularly those in the South, have been able to create social service infrastructures. This has resulted in establishing and developing various kinds of diaconal work within the territories of these churches. This work helps to alleviate hunger, pain and suffering among people. Scholarships and training programs help in developing human resources for continuing work in this area.

Through international diaconia: The LWF witnesses through service in situa-



tions of disaster and need throughout the world, offering a healing presence to individuals, communities and nations. With a commitment to contribute toward making the world more just and peaceful, the LWF offers support to refugee populations and internally displaced persons, empowerment to local communities to claim their rights, programs for healing and reconciliation in post-conflict situations and public policy advocacy.

Through the church's prophetic ministry: In addition to diaconal service, the prophetic ministry of the church has been one of the most effective means of addressing and transforming the world. Based on the mandate of the Word of God as well as ongoing analyses of situations today, the LWF and its member churches have drawn attention to specific situations of injustice, oppression and conflict in society and, at the same time, challenged governments and other institutions to adopt humane policies and

practices consistent with norms of justice and peacemaking.

This prophetic ministry is increasingly viewed not as separate from but as an important aspect of the church's more traditional diaconal work. This linkage, which needs to be encouraged throughout the LWF constituency, was the focus of the 2002 global consultation on diaconia, "Prophetic Diaconia: For the Healing of the World."

Through supporting local communities to claim their rights: Advocacy is the right and responsibility of all communities as they claim their rights to build sustainable lives for themselves and their children. Within the LWF communion, member churches, on their own and with others, seek to support communities in these efforts. This involves, for example, assisting local women's groups to gain economic independence, empowering rural communities to claim their rights to water and land, building the capacity of workers to negotiate for fair labor conditions and assisting refugees who seek justice. In all these ways, the inherent dignity of all persons is recognized as people become engaged in building their lives and futures.

Through solidarity or advocacy groups: When political activists are silenced and imprisoned, the voice of church groups keeps the liberation fires burning. For example, solidarity and advocacy groups, which sprung up in European and North American Lutheran churches during the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa, served to heal the world. They did this by mobilizing the whole church and the international community to focus on specific moral issues, thereby globalizing the problems of injustice and oppression. Similar efforts since then have focused on the Dalits in India and Palestinians in the Middle East.

The advocacy groups have made and continue to make a tremendous contribution, not only in inspiring hope among the

Without such a prophetic ministry of the church, for example, it would have taken longer for countries like South Africa and Namibia to be liberated. This was particularly important because the apartheid government had silenced and imprisoned political activists, forcing many of them into exile. Thus, for many decades, the church was the only institution that established a healing presence by speaking on behalf of the people and advocating the causes they espoused. More recent examples where the LWF has been very involved are international campaigns to ban landmines and to cancel external debts of highly indebted countries.

oppressed in far-away countries, but also in lobbying and urging national governments to adopt progressive and liberating policies. In addition to lobbying governments, some communities have been mobilized to boycott the products of countries with oppressive regimes, and individuals encouraged to withdraw their investments from companies operating in or dealing with countries with those regimes. Financial resources generated by these groups and their churches have helped pay for the legal costs of those charged for political activity and for the support of the dependants of political prisoners.

Healing in the face of new challenges to the Lutheran communion

Communion and diversity

The coexistence of the quest for Lutheran unity through the concept of communion, and the historical phenomenon of territorial and national churches is both an asset and a problem. National and cultural diversity within the Lutheran family has been an occasion for mutual enrichment. Churches can gain and learn much from one another.

Diversity can heal or divide the communion. It heals by making available a variety of resources and experiences as a means of expressing the love we share. The test of the authenticity of a communion is when it is able to manifest itself under circumstances of diversity, in-

cluding those leading to real tensions. We often experience the reality of this during meetings such as an Assembly.

Diversity can divide when its resources are used for self-serving ends. This happens, for example, when controversial, local issues are internationalized and introduced on the global agenda without the exercise of necessary pastoral sensitivity. We face a similar danger when congregations introduce radical practices out of context with the broad consensus of the member church. Under those circumstances, diversity can plant seeds of anarchy within the local communion.

What are the critical situations in the world where these solidarity, advocacy and related strategies are especially needed? How should they be developed and mobilized within the communion?

There is another side of the coin. In the interest of promoting and implementing new practices, arising from new theological insights, the communion may commit the sin of impatience at the global level. It can do this by taking collective steps, calculated to punish a member church for failing or being too slow to implement certain practices.

Authentic diversity always serves the interest of the communion. The solution lies in keeping a healthy balance between unity and diversity. It was the intention of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession to enunciate the principle of balance between unity and diversity. According to this Article, diversity is permissible as long as there is agreement concerning

“the preaching of the gospel and the administration of sacraments.” This served the Lutheran family well particularly at a time when internal Lutheran unity around the question of justification was the main issue at stake. But what about now?

Do you agree with this analysis? What are some specific examples of where this has or might occur? How can pastoral sensitivity be balanced with prophetic critique?

Communion and the crisis of norms

In our times, the list of theological and ethical issues crying out for consideration, deliberation and consensus is increasing. The social, cultural, economic and political environment in which many member churches of the LWF minister, has undergone rapid changes. As a result, churches face new problems and challenges, which call for new solutions and answers. At the same time, the understanding of the authority and meaning of Scripture has also undergone methodological, ideological and conceptual transformation, depending on where you are within the LWF's constituency.

The Constitution acknowledges the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments “to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service” (para. II). However, what was previously considered self-evident in Scripture is, in the case of some specific issues, no longer understood that way. In other words, the normative character of Scripture as it relates to concrete issues, is no longer transparent and self-evident. A greater diversity in Scripture itself is now increasingly acknowledged. Consideration must also be given to such matters as cultural contexts then and now, how we understand and analyze the question at stake, the role of reason, experience and other factors. The consequence is that today there is bound to be a variety of ways of looking at many social and moral issues.

For a world communion such as the LWF, this may create a variety of answers to the same moral or ecclesial question. Two current examples are how we understand family, gender and sexuality from a Christian perspective (see the chapter on “Justice and Healing in Families”) and who can be ordained. For a communion to remain a communion there must be a store of shared spiritual and moral values. But, how much is necessary? Where there is a perceived dispute over values and principles, processes are needed for deliberating and arbitrating the dispute. The communion needs some shared norms that safeguard its integrity. There are actual or potential splits already within the communion due perhaps in part to a weakening of previously undisputed normative principles.

Church splits within the communion

Recent years have seen divisive disputes within and among LWF member churches. Significant efforts have been made, by LWF staff as well as by other member churches, to resolve these disputes. However, when churches feel they lack normative, spiritual and moral principles of arbitration, they take their disputes to secular courts. When a mutually accepted outcome is not reached through court action, a schism may result. The part of the church that has broken away then applies for LWF membership, which often is accepted. These are disturbing trends.

When the LWF understood itself as “a free association of churches,” this did not create as much of a problem as it does now when the LWF understands itself in spiritual and theological terms, as a communion of churches. A communion

What should be done in these situations? What role should the LWF and member churches play?

Do you agree with this assessment? Are common ethical norms required to keep the communion together? How would these be arrived at, and what authoritative weight would they carry within the communion? How much diversity is possible, on theological grounds? What further attention should the Department for Theology and Studies be giving to these matters? (see the Six Year Report)

of churches should not mean a communion of splitting churches.

Communion and the unequal distribution of resources

We cannot expect an equal distribution of financial and other resources. There are bound to be differences. Yet, the huge discrepancies within the communion have an historical background and are largely due to policies and practices of international financial institutions today. They follow a North/South pattern illustrated by the fact that many countries in the South owe countries in the North significant debts.

There are difficulties in living out communion in relation to money and power. In the LWF the problem is that most of the material resources to help churches in the South come from the North. These discrepancies are not only tied to global politics and economics, but threaten the spiritual life of what it means to be a communion. This is especially the case if we take Luther's understanding seriously, namely, that through the communion "we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love."⁸

The sharing of spiritual and material gifts, which is implicit in communion, cannot be isolated from examining the causes of inequities in wealth and joining with others to change such.⁹

This is especially urgent amid today's reality of economic globalization, which we as a communion must continue to address. (See the chapter on "Transforming Economic Globalization")

Some new directions to consider

- **Promoting spirituality:** There is a general decline in spirituality in many member churches. The way this phenomenon manifests itself differs from church to church, and from culture to culture. Generally, it may mean having a materialistic attitude to life, lack of prayer life, having a vague knowledge of the Word of God and a decline in other spiritual practices. In addition to the study and resources that the Office for Worship and Congregational Life has recently published, there is a need to consider new ways of promoting spiritual life in community, such as
 - forming prayer groups during and continuing after the Assembly,
 - developing an LWF cycle of prayers for use by member churches,
 - having occasional healing services, such as those that are a part of the Assembly worship.
- **Sharing stories of how communion is being experienced and lived out:** The Lutheran constituency is very rich and diverse. Often, what is happening in one

From your perspective, what tensions and problems do these disparities in financial resources raise within the communion? How should these be addressed?

place is not known in another. There is a need to promote forums for sharing simple stories about experiencing communion and life in general. This should be done in ways that recognize that not all churches have access to modern tools of communication.

- **Use biblical models for pooling resources:** One of the striking features of the Early Church was that the newly established churches founded by Paul were actually helping the mother church in

What additional ideas do you have for how the communion and its witness in the world can be strengthened?

Jerusalem. This and other biblical models can be developed to help us face the problem of sharing resources equitably. How might such models apply to North/South global church dynamics?

- **Promote joint action ventures:** Joint ventures were very effective during the struggles for liberation in Southern Africa, for example. What other models of joint action should be identified and promoted today?
- **Consider changing the name of the LWF to reflect our communion reality:** More on this subject will come in a report and recommendations to the Assembly.

Notes

¹ John Reumann, "Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts," in Thomas Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), *On the Way To Fuller Communion, Official Report of the Fifth World Conference On Faith and Order, Faith and Order Paper No. 166* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994), p. 39.

² See Eugene Brand, "Toward a Lutheran Communion: Pulpit and Altar Fellowship," *LWF Report 26* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988).

³ See, for instance, *On the Way to Fuller Communion, op.cit.* (note 1), particularly the Report of the Director, Günther Gassmann, "Montreal 1963—Santiago de Compostella 1993," p.14. See also relevant essays in Alan Falconer (ed.), *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper No 177* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998).

⁴ *Official Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly, LWF Report No 28/29* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1990), p. 81.

⁵ See "Lutheran Churches in Transition: Summary of Challenges and Proposals," in

Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition, LWF Documentation 47* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), p. 23.

⁶ For example, in parts of Madagascar and Tanzania. See Josiah Kibira, "Revival in Tanzania," in *Lutheran World* 21:3, p. 282.

⁷ Elizabeth Templeton, "Towards the Realization of Common Life," in *On the Way to Fuller Communion, op. cit.* (note 1), p. 119.

⁸ "Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Blood of Christ," in E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1960), p. 58. See also how this is further developed in the LWF working paper, "Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion" (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001).

⁹ Heinrich Holze (ed.), *The Church as Communion, LWF Documentation 42* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), p. 20.

C. Healing Divisions Within the One Church



God's Spirit is actively healing the Church. Although considerable progress has been made in ecumenical relations in recent years, the healing of old divisions must continue. How do we draw upon the meaning and power of the sacraments for Christian unity? New questions have arisen about the profile, identity and role of Lutherans in these ecumenical relations. New challenges also arise from Christians with whom we have not been in dialogue. How is the LWF involved and how might it be involved in new ecumenical pursuits? What are the difficult matters that must be addressed? Toward what ends?

Life is a journey. Images of journeys abound in the Bible, from the Exodus to the itinerant ministry of Jesus to Paul's missionary trips. Images of a journey evoke experiences and impressions that outline important truths about life. They portray a dynamic, changing picture of a horizon that provides glimpses of new possibilities.

The Church also is on a journey, not frozen in time, but moving from familiar landscapes to unknown ones, changing in order to remain faithful. Traveling this journey is difficult without maps, which help direct us into unfamiliar territories we may already have anticipated in our imaginations.

Church unity and diversity

When we confess in the Creed that we believe in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” we are rehearsing the map that has been handed down to us. It does not show details, just a path for exploring what it means to be church. In this journey we come across other roads, travelers, histories—all of which have embarked on the same journey. We meet because the map is not our doing, but God’s.

The guide for our lives as Christians is grounded in the holy, unifying presence of God in Jesus Christ revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Lutheran and other churches have emphasized that the church partakes in God’s own life whose innermost reality is love, communion. Through God’s Word of healing reconciliation and sharing God’s very life through the sacraments, God draws people into this communion or *koinonia*.

Discuss how this has occurred in ecumenical dialogues in which you or your church have participated. Which dialogues have been especially important for your church? (Refer to the section on Ecumenical Affairs in the Six Year Report)

The Holy Spirit flowing to our hearts and bodies makes us long for what is not yet fully realized—the healing of the many divisions still fracturing the one Church. We cannot enjoy this wholeness if our divisions are not healed. This is why the unity of the Church is so crucial, for it corresponds to the unifying love of God for all that God has created.

The LWF is deeply committed to pursuing the unity of the Church. Our faith tells us that the unity of the Church is one of the marks that we have to look for, because this is the direction toward which the Spirit blows and points. Out of many the Spirit makes us one, inviting

and guiding us into this unity. Our corresponding task is to unfold the meaning and the forms of this unity that we share in the triune God. The Spirit that stirs up belief also heals our divisions.

Ecumenical dialogues are one of the important ways through which the healing gift of the Spirit is realized. Through them we are able to see with different eyes the many barriers of separation that have been erected between our churches and traditions. Yet, we also realize how much we share on account of our faith in Christ and the communion in the Holy Spirit. The ecumenical dialogues are not only human political negotiations, but real developments in our commitment to witness to the Spirit which the Father through the Son pours out on the Church. They are signposts on a journey during which we ourselves may need to change, as we recognize with new eyes our fellow travelers who seek the same destiny.

God showers the Church with many gifts, disclosing the wholeness that God promises for creation. The Spirit creates unity not in spite of but through the recognition and reconciliation of diversity. Diverse *charisms* are signs of the presence of the Spirit. In short, we find a unity in plurality, or a unity through diversity. This diversity can become a token of discord if each claims to be an exclusive or the most central manifestation of the Spirit. The gifts are many, but to be *charisms*, genuine fruits of the Spirit, they need to be placed in service of the whole body. Paul reminds us that the spiritual gifts are meant for the edification of the body, for the whole community of faith (1 Cor 14).

The Christian church is a diverse reality precisely because it is a creature of the Spirit. Creating unity out of diversity seems to be the *modus operandi* of our God. There is no plan of God which excludes this diversity, whether in the world at large or in the church. Dictator-

ship or authoritarian regimes are not consistent with God's purposes. The wholeness to which the church witnesses is lived out in the mutual recognition of these different gifts, as well as in a common commitment to mission.

When human sin transforms the richness of diversity into hostile, exclusive and fighting groups, an essential aspect of God's work is breached (1 Cor 3). This pain in the church is also God's pain. The Spirit aches and yearns for the unity of all creatures. It is a Spirit of unity and fellowship, and therefore also a Spirit of reconciliation, of networking, of bridging spheres that are often separated or alienated. Church divisions, no matter how historically justifiable they have been, are certainly a "*skandalon*" to the work of the Spirit.

Discuss some examples of where these painful kinds of divisions exist. How have, or should they have been dealt with?

Encounter, dialogue, recognition and fellowship are in and of themselves important aspects of the church's ecumenical journey. They also are important for the witness and mission of the church in the world. Commitment to Christian unity is intimately related to our commitment to being a communion in a divided world. Furthermore, the unity of the churches may be a crucial step toward overcoming other forms of human division. Through their ecumenical engagements, many Lutheran churches have experienced a renewal in their vision and mission in the world.

For these reasons, it is unfortunate when the church's prophetic role of witnessing to the healing and wholeness that God promises is weakened by tension and strife over the church's ecumenical engagements. This sometimes occurs in relations between churches, but also within a

church, for example, over understandings of ministry or positions on ethical issues. Faithfulness to the Spirit who unites may on occasion result in new divisions. In the face of these possible difficulties, we trust in a God for whom encounter, dialogue, recognition and fellowship are essential dimensions of God's intentions for creation.

Discuss examples of how churches together have addressed divisions in society.

Healing through ecumenical engagements

The oneness of the Church precedes our quest for visible unity. As churches living in history, with various creaturely limitations, we may be unable to move quickly to visible and full unity. Yet there are milestones on our churches' ecumenical journey that indicate different levels of approach, conversation and fellowship with other churches. For instance, some of our churches have begun this journey by cooperating with other Christian bodies on certain social, economic and cultural issues, or by forming regional or national conciliar bodies. This occurs with a sense that the healing of life in society is closely interwoven with the healing of church divisions. Christian praxis in society—through diaconal work or by forging common responses to hunger, war and disaster—has and still is a critical dimension of the churches' ecumenical endeavors.

Churches have also formally engaged in bilateral and multilateral dialogues on doctrine and church practices. Here ways are sought to reach consensus about the apostolic faith we confess. Often, the aim is to build on mutual recognition of baptism, and to move toward eucharistic sharing and mutual recognition of ministries, so that the common mission in the world may become more credible and effective. Drawing on a past of fellowship

and collaboration, some churches have moved into a visible unity where eucharistic sharing and mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries occur. These represent different dimensions in ecumenical engagement and should be seen as complementary; the realization of one dimension leads to another.

How is your church engaged in dialogues with other churches? What have been the important breakthroughs in international dialogues? How should these be pursued further?

Dialogues and other ecumenical engagements have presupposed and shown different understandings of unity. They have developed out of the needs in particular contexts, and with a view to resolving particular difficulties or safeguarding certain values and understandings. Our sense of what needs to be healed depends on what understanding of unity we advocate.

Churches of the Lutheran communion, for example, have highlighted “reconciled diversity.” As the 1977 LWF Assembly stated:

this position encourages an understanding of unity which allows room for the diversity of confessional traditions and the existence of communities to foster these traditions.¹

Reconciled diversity was never meant as a static model, simply accepting all existing differences, nor is it a sanctioning of the confessional status quo, as though characteristics and differences are eternal, unchangeable essences. Reconciled diversity is an interpretation of the nature of the Church and its unity stemming from the biblical understandings of the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is a dimension of the gift of salvation that the Spirit makes available to us. Its unfolding belongs to

the life of discipleship. Emphasizing reconciled diversity does not stand in the way of considering institutional aspects of the visible unity of the Church. But, it takes seriously that diversity is inherent in human life, and all of creation. Diversity is reconciled when it is accepted as in principle legitimate, when claims and actions that are destructive for human fellowship are appropriately dealt with and when differences are not only tolerated, but also appreciated on account of God’s grace. In the ecumenical context, reconciled diversity upholds the value of differences as an integral aspect of the testimony of the New Testament regarding the church and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Models with different emphases, such as conciliar fellowship and *koinonia*, also play important roles in furthering Christian unity. They are also biblically grounded, and address unity and diversity. *Koinonia*, which has been predominant in ecumenical discussions of the World Council of Churches in recent years, is basic to the ecclesiology of communion in the LWF. The quest is for the full, visible unity of churches at local, regional and global levels.

There is broad agreement that the unity to which we are called is marked by

- a common confession of the apostolic faith,
- a common sacramental life entered through one baptism and celebrated together in the eucharistic fellowship,
- a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled, and
- a common mission witnessing to all people through the gospel of God’s grace and serving the whole of creation.²

Considerable ecumenical progress has been made in these areas in recent years, leading to structural forms of church fellowship. Several LWF member churches in Europe and North America have entered formal ecumenical agreements at the regional level with Anglican and/or Reformed churches. Anglican-Lutheran dialogues in Africa, Asian and Latin America are also an encouraging sign of commitment to Christian unity through forms of shared life, often taking into consideration the particular social challenges the churches face. In Europe, Lutherans and Methodists have achieved significant forms of church fellowship in several countries. In the coming years, there is likely to be a further development of regional agreements. A continuing internal LWF agenda is to clarify the ecumenical profile of Lutheran churches that simultaneously relate to churches of both episcopal and non-episcopal traditions.

The visible unity of the Church is also promoted through continued international dialogues, which the LWF participates in as a worldwide communion. These enable member churches to act together as one global ecumenical partner. Important progress is being made in dialogues with the Anglican Communion, the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

What are the questions and relationships that ecumenical work of the LWF should especially give attention to in the future?

Healing within the Lutheran communion

Our dialogues with other Christians bring joy, renewed enthusiasm and high hopes. To walk the pathway of the rec-

onciling gift of the Holy Spirit, however, also involves frustration, disappointment and disagreement. In these dialogues, we learn that our partners may have expectations, understandings and goals different from our own. It is important to discover and understand these differences, so that we can adjust and redirect the goals we set for ourselves and for others. This is an inescapable dimension of “reconciled diversity.”

On other occasions, however, our ecumenical progress or stalemate may evoke sharp disagreements within and among the Lutheran churches themselves, and differences in how Lutherans understand their role in the ecumenical movement. What is considered a “gift” by some is considered a “Trojan horse” by others; what is a reasonable compromise to some is seen by others as a betrayal of the Lutheran confessional tradition.

Discuss some examples of where these kinds of differences have emerged. How should they be dealt with?

These disagreements can spark a necessary and lively debate around the issues at stake in Lutheran interpretations of Christian unity (with special reference to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession). This comes to the fore when we face the conditions for Christian unity that are set forth by other Christians with whom we are in dialogue. Are these compatible with the interpretation of the gospel that the Lutheran Confessions uphold? The Lutheran confessional writings do not fully develop a Lutheran doctrine of the Church. The implicit ecclesiological concept assumes as its living context the rich complexity of practices traditionally associated with the sixteenth-century Western church.³ What is clearly spelled out is that the church’s sole grounding is in the justifying Word, which is “the true treasure of the Church.” For some, this is enough

for Christian unity; for others, this neglects other matters essential for the sake of this treasure.

How have these other factors played a significant role in ecumenical discussions you have experienced?

Among Lutheran theologians this has generated a renewed interest in the different possibilities of interpreting the confessional notions of agreement and consensus (*consentire*). There is a sense that former interpretations have excessively stressed that the agreement has to be reached at all levels of Christian doctrine, which made it all but impossible to agree with Christian churches other than those which uphold the Augsburg Confession. However, “doctrine” in the original Lutheran understanding involved something different from rigid doctrinal formulas. Although the Lutheran reformers never denied that the faith of the Church can be formulated in authoritative language, they strongly emphasized that the meaning of doctrine unfolds in proclamation, through Word and sacraments, and in relation to the rest of life. “Doctrine” is inseparably related to the living core of the gospel, namely, the grace of God that justifies the sinner for Christ’s sake. It is the justifying and healing presence of God among the assembly of believers that constitutes the ground for the Church and its unity.

Ecumenical agreement and dissent is not only a matter of purely confessional or doctrinal issues. For every church and tradition there is a certain “ethos” that is expressed together with its faith, in both explicit and implicit ways. This can be observed on topics such as the authority to interpret Scripture, forms of church discipline and oversight, liturgical expressions, gender language and the church’s moral teachings. From a Lutheran point of view, none of these

should become conditions for church unity. In the search for visible church unity, it is essential to clarify the relationship between the unifying gospel and the wider issues churches face.

Perspectives and insights from the social sciences can provide indispensable assistance for understanding and clarifying other factors in society that affect ecumenical relations, dialogues and their reception. We should encourage the insights from a wider spectrum of disciplines and voices than those involved previously.

New challenges and avenues for Christian unity

The ways in which dialogues are conducted and the decision as to who participates are strategic matters when speaking about the unity of the Church. The diversity ascribed to the gifts of the Spirit among the churches can also be applied to how ecumenical issues are approached and by whom. Diverse experiences and approaches need to be recognized and represented in ecumenical dialogues. Priorities and institutional forms are integral aspects of the ecumenical landscape.

In your church, who participates in the ecumenical dialogues / encounters? Do you feel that a sufficient diversity of voices and areas of expertise are represented?

Questions such as the following are sometimes raised: Should ecumenical dialogues primarily be a matter for experts who discuss and develop documents? Or, should they also be practical ways of recognizing and understanding better those who are different from us? Are dialogues more theory or practice?

What, if anything, needs to be proposed about the assumptions, methodologies and participants in LWF-related ecumenical dialogues?

This, however, is a false dichotomy. Ecumenical relationships move in complementary ways. The documents resulting from dialogues call for certain practical, visible results for the unity of the Church. But, what results are being sought, and who determines such? How can the concerns of different regions of the world be balanced in determining how the Lutheran communion is represented? Experience shows that persons representing the North, and who speak German or English, tend to have an “upper hand” in many ecumenical contexts where Lutherans are involved. How can this be counteracted? These are important opportunities for incorporating different experiences and challenges in the ecumenical field.

It is key that those who officially represent the churches remain at all times faithful to the gospel and sensitive to the experiences and demands of the believers whom they represent. In this sense, greater attention should also be given to the “groundwork” that has already been laid by the multitude of those brothers and sisters who, in their daily lives, further the coming together of different traditions—through friendships, marriage, families, work and community activities.

In paying more attention to these relationships between Christians, new ecumenical “demands” confront the churches. One of these is the intense yearning to share together in the Eucharist. Many times, ordinary lay persons legitimately question the slowness of church leaders to solve matters important to their religious sensitivities. Indeed, it is painful for couples, friends

and families who share so much in life to be unable officially to partake of the same table of the Lord. It therefore becomes even more urgent to grasp anew the healing gift of the Spirit, not only through words in documents, but as a reality in our daily lives.

For many of our churches, different forms of diaconal ministry—including relief and development work, socio-political advocacy, defense of human and environmental rights—have long been inroads to further joint ecumenical commitment. Many congregations of various denominations work cooperatively in local communities; national councils of churches (many of them including the Roman Catholic Church) take active roles in speaking out publicly on a range of issues. Internationally, the Lutheran contribution to ecumenical advocacy has been a priority for many years, including now with work on HIV/AIDS. In recent years, the challenges of economic globalization as well as the common peril of ecological destruction have proven to be fertile ground for a renewed ecumenical cooperation that transcends confessional theological walls. These relationships, based on a shared vision and practical experience, are an important expression of our ecumenical commitment, and a significant foundation on which to build other ecumenical initiatives in the search for unity.

While the lack of a deeper **theological** dialogue can lead to a weakening of ecumenical commitment once the “practical” concern fades, it is also true that the ecumenical commitment becomes a more “real” and enduring matter when pre-

What more should the LWF be saying or doing on the question of eucharistic sharing with those churches with which we are not yet in full communion?



ceded by different experiences of practices, collaboration **and** dialogue. In any case, it is crucial that theological conversation not only **follow** commitment after the fact, but that it be an integral dimension continually accompanying this praxis. The churches' praxis colors and conditions the theological issues deemed necessary and relevant, as well as the partners in dialogue and encounter. It is crucial that international dialogues respect the different methodologies and experiences, which must be balanced by the more traditional, academic methodology.

This becomes especially important if our ecumenical work is to relate to churches of the whole communion. For example, the fact that many churches in the South have had practical experiences of ecumenical engagement with new partners has given this engagement special charac-

teristics. The most conspicuous history, tradition and advances in the unity of the Church have been among churches in the North. Their contexts have provided the main methodologies of dialogue, which generates a language and certain codes that reflect both a richness and a deficiency. The richness shows the depth and the new insights that ecumenical dialogue can bring to the partners in the conversation, both regarding one's own and the other's tradition. The deficiency is that this method and language may be quite valuable for certain regions and agendas, but not necessarily for all.

Churches in the South have to some extent assimilated this methodology and appreciate the resulting theological and ecclesiological resources. Furthermore, in many cases they have been enriched by the local and regional bilateral dialogues

carried forth by these churches. However, this tradition of ecumenical engagement is quite foreign to many of the new churches and movements that have sprung up especially in the South—and with whom many Lutheran churches are beginning to engage ecumenically. For many of these newer churches, the experience of the anointing by the Spirit and lack of a confessional tradition are their identifying “marks.” For them, these marks become a condition for Christian unity, similar to how the gospel and the sacraments are the important marks for Lutherans, or for others, the historical episcopate. These new marks can also become new forms of a non-inclusive spirit or a fundamentalism. But, the reality is that these churches and movements, which are among the fastest growing throughout the world, present a wide range and variety of practices and concepts that challenge how we have pursued ecumenical work in the past.

What challenges for ecumenical work do new churches and movements like these pose in your situation? What should be done?

We are at a crossroads: a traditional understanding of ecumenism is blending with new perspectives and challenges. Lutherans may remain indifferent to this, smugly resting on our confessional history or the prestige achieved by our present dialogues. Or, we can face this as a new ecumenical challenge of truly global proportions. Dialogue here is not merely for the purpose of achieving full visible unity, as currently understood. It is also a means of learning more about the Holy Spirit and the new realities the Spirit creates. Lutheran churches in the South may actually mediate a renewal of the Lutheran communion as they learn about the many gifts shared with them by many of these “new” churches. What is new to us is different and implies diversity in our quest for unity. Perhaps Lutheran churches will discover that many of their theological treasures and gifts acquire a new vitality as they participate in the new roads that the Spirit is opening in the world. Our churches are invited to a new and different journey on the same territory signaled by God’s healing and unifying presence.

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Notes

¹ *In Christ—A New Community*, The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), p. 200.

² Cf. Roman Catholic-Lutheran Joint Commission, *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), p. 23; *In Christ—Called to Witness: Assembly Study Book-Ninth Assembly*, Hong

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³ *The Ecumenical Profile ...*, *ibid.*, p. 27.

D. The Mission of the Church in Multi-Faith Contexts



The mission of the Church points to and participates in the coming of God's reign. How can every Christian and congregation be empowered to participate in this mission? Reconciliation among people is a key aspect of this mission, especially in multi-faith contexts. How can this kind of healing occur through such means as dialogue and living and working together? How does this challenge and transform some past mission assumptions and practices? How should this be reflected in the revised mission document and in other LWF work?

Mission and God's reign

The 1988 LWF document, *Together in God's Mission*, defined mission as:

- The ongoing saving work of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and
- God's mandate to God's people to participate in this continuing saving work.¹

Proclamation of the gospel, calling people to believe in Jesus Christ and to become members of the new community in Christ, participation in the work for peace and justice and in the struggle against all enslaving and dehumanizing powers are therefore an integral part of mission of the church. All such activities point to the reality of the Reign of God and to its final realization at the fulfillment of history.³

God is a God in mission: the “sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the world was the supreme manifestation of divine missionary activity.”² God is love, transcending all kinds of fences and barriers built by human beings. The church continues God’s holistic mission by participating in the coming of God’s reign and witnessing to it in multi-faith and other diverse contexts.

The last two Assemblies continued to develop the theological understanding of this holistic understanding of mission. The 1998 LWF Consultation on Churches in Mission underlined and called for the LWF to revise the mission document, *Together in God’s Mission*. Here “transformation” was identified as an important mission imperative “as the church, in every context, is called to be a transforming community of God’s people.”⁴ Mission as transformation challenges local churches to be themselves transformed in order to become instruments of transformation in the world.

Every Christian is called to *mission as proclamation*, to share the gospel story in his/her context in ways that communicate God’s saving action and meaningful presence in the world.

Mission as service highlights the diaconal dimension of a faith active in love, working for the empowerment and liberation of those in need.

Mission as advocacy for justice denotes the church’s praxis in the public arena as affirming the dignity of human life and working for justice in political, economic, social and ecological spheres.⁵

God empowers mission

The question of “power” is crucial. Since the Constantinian era, Christian mission has often been linked to the oppressors rather than the liberators, especially under slavery, colonization and patriarchy. In many places, this is the predominant form of mission that has been experienced. For example,

the spirit of the Crusades dominated the Portuguese colonization. This ideology of holy war resulted in there never having been any missions in the proper sense in Latin America. There was conquest, implantation of the dominant religious structure. Mission and conquest are irreconcilable.⁶

The church is called to name how blatant and less obviously dominating powers continue to prevail in some contexts today.

On what powers or authorities does the church rely today in order to carry out its mission? What relationships of inequality and dependency are perpetuated by those who provide money and other resources for mission? How should this be addressed?

Church leadership at all levels, as well as individual Christians, are often tempted to use the pursuit of God’s mission to gain power over others, or to “make others like us.” If the church embarks on mission for the purpose of gaining control or power over others, or for imposing the church’s cultural, political, socio-economic or other agendas on communities, this becomes a distortion of mission. Mission ought not to isolate people from their communities, or

to destroy the culture of others. When the church attempts to take away what is life-giving to communities, this is not God's mission. When the church understands its call to participate in the *missio Dei* and God's in-breaking reign in the world, then the church will be involved in giving life to the community.

The LWF, member churches and congregations are called to examine their reasons for being involved in God's mission, and to name those powers which attempt to usurp God's power and turn the gospel into a commodity under human control. As a reflection of the *missio Dei*, the church's mission for the sake of the gospel is to give life freely to others. Jesus' life and death reveal that the nature of the church's mission is one of servanthood. Similarly, the church in mission is to rely on the power of God's Spirit working through self-denial, suffering and the cross, rather than on the wealth and power of the world. The fruits of mission are gifts of God, granted not through human power and wisdom, but by proclaiming and sharing the life of the crucified Lord (1 Cor 1:18, 27).⁷

God empowers all the baptized to share in mission

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). The power comes from the Holy Spirit working within a community and within creation. If the power and authority of mission are always God's and not the

church's, then God's mission cannot be controlled by clergy and other leaders in congregations, churches, seminaries, mission societies, the LWF, or elsewhere. The gospel, its interpretation and God's mission belong to the whole community, and not a ruling or learned class. The Spirit is in all, for the benefit of all.

The disciples were sent out by Jesus Christ (Lk 10:1ff.) as an extension of his own mission (Jn 20:21). They received "power from on high" (Lk 24:49). The focus is on God's rather than human actions. In this way, we can understand how the doctrine of justification is central to a Lutheran understanding of God's mission and the mission of every congregation. In contexts where people try to justify their own words and deeds, mission proclaims the message that there is no need for self-justification, for it is God alone who justifies.

Every Christian is called and empowered by God to the priesthood of all believers. As Lutherans today are rediscovering this, a paradigm shift has been occurring in the church's understanding of mission, from the use of "power over" to one of "power with." In this power-sharing approach to mission, the power of the gospel becomes relational and mutual. Through baptism, God empowers us to be participants in God's mission. All the baptized belong to a

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

How can the LWF support member churches toward more power-sharing approaches to mission? What does a mutual, power-sharing approach to mission mean in the *communio* relationships of the LWF, especially in situations of need? What does it mean to live out mission in solidarity in the different regions of the LWF and between the LWF member churches? Share some experiences of how this has been or is occurring.

Despite a strong understanding of the priesthood of all believers, many Lutheran congregations are still pastor-centered congregations. How can this change? In multi-faith contexts this challenge is raised, for example, by many non-Christian spiritualistic movements, which are spreading very quickly worldwide. Many of them do not have professional leaders or missionaries, but all the members see themselves as missionaries in their daily lives. This also is the case in some Lutheran congregations.

How does this challenge us as Lutheran churches? How could we become less pastor-centered, but without losing the central importance of Word and sacraments?

As the baptized live out God's mission in their daily lives, they share their experiences in the congregation, grow through their mutual sharing, and are nurtured through God's Word, the sacraments and the *communio*. In the congregation, the baptized discover their particular gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are always to be used in the context of serving the community, rather than to gain power for oneself. Pastors and other specially trained people help equip others to carry out God's mission.

Share your experiences of mission in daily life. What does it mean for a congregation to be in mission?

The congregation participating in God's mission is rooted in the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. In this mission, God's self is given to the congregation, which in turn is called to participate in God's mission of salvation and of reconciling and healing relationships between humans and the rest of creation.

Inculturating the gospel in word and deed

In a power-sharing approach, mission does not happen through monologue, but through dialogue. The gospel of Jesus Christ is manifest in diverse ways among different peoples and cultures. We must have the courage to move away from old, obsolete models toward new approaches in which the culture and values of people are appropriately respected. The commandment to love our neighbor involves more than trying to "bring him or her to Jesus." Inculturation of the gospel will happen when we become aware that there is more than one way to live out the gospel and ourselves are open to the risks involved in authentic dialogue.

We proclaim the gospel in word and deed. The way in which Christians and congregations live is in itself a witness. Word without deed can be abstract and powerless; deed without word can be misunderstood. Our witness in multi-faith contexts will be faithfully and effectively realized when words and deeds become two sides of the same coin. Working for peace, justice and the integrity of creation—which is part of mission—has to be carefully prepared and rooted in who God is and how God acts.

Thus, we participate in God's mission through

- **Words:** preaching, praying, singing, dialoguing, educating, writing.
- **Deeds:** helping the neighbor, working for peace, justice and integrity of the creation, acting in society and through politics.
- **Community life:** being present in the world, respect and openness toward others, sharing with them, meeting their needs and those of creation.

There may be times and places, where proclaiming the gospel is not possible, and the only way of witnessing is through wordless service rooted in prayer. This silent service can have many faces, such as meeting human needs or working for social and political transformation. Living out this witness can also involve suffering and in some circumstances lead to martyrdom.

It is the common responsibility of the whole church at all levels to nurture and equip Christians for proclamation, witness and service in multi-faith contexts. What more should the LWF be doing to support member churches in meeting this challenge?

If the gospel is for the entire community, then a congregation that takes mission seriously must be inclusive in its language and practices. Referring to all people as “men” excludes women, imagining God only in male terms suggests that only males are created in God’s image, using “us” versus “them” language suggests that some are not fully part of the community. Such language and practices exclude or alienate some from the community. A recurring theme in the gospels is the way in which Jesus always included people in the community. An inclusive congregation is an open community nurtured and challenged by God’s mission. Members try to live God’s mission of reconciliation in love and solidarity as a healing community, continually crossing religious, social, economic and other boundaries.

The mission of reconciliation in multi-faith contexts

Many Christians have directly experienced reconciliation as a healing process with other Christian churches (See the chapter on “Healing Divisions in the One Church”). What about reconciliation with people of other faiths? If reconciliation is the keyword of the gospel and the starting-point of mission, this should be a starting point for relating to them.

From the perspective of Christian faith, reconciliation is a costly means of grace. It often comes at a high price, and should not be taken too lightly nor spoken of loosely. Reconciliation is much more than a pat on the shoulder, or a feeling of goodwill that seeks to overcome divisions for the sake of peace and harmony. When people are anxious about losing their power or pride, they are probably not ready for peace or reconciliation. Likewise, reconciliation within or between nations is not possible if the governing authority will not humble itself and recognize its sins or shortcomings against the people.⁸

Christians sometimes understand “reconciliation” as implying that past wounds should not be talked about, or to try to forgive and, if possible, even forget. This painful culture of silence can render dialogue as a way of reconciliation impossible. Disclosure of what has happened is a necessary first stepping stone towards the healing of the wounds.⁹

An effective method is needed in order to see the wounds and errors and

How can all people feel and know that they are welcome into an inclusive community? Discuss examples of how congregations, member churches and the LWF have transcended cultural, religious, socio-economic and gender boundaries, and through this have had new experiences of being mutually empowered.

come to terms with the past. Current rifts need to be mended, whenever and wherever possible, as a sign of goodwill and a new beginning. For reconciliation to occur, a long democratic process is necessary. This requires facing facts, admitting sins, mourning, crying out in anger and hurt, and telling one's story in private and in public. Past and present conflicts must be faced openly in order to develop understanding and empathy, to overcome prejudice and exploitation, and to redress unjust structures of violence at all levels. Forgiveness may be the step toward reconciliation, and the real hope for a meaningful dialogue which attempts to strengthen the nonviolent possibilities for resolving conflict.

Where is reconciliation urgently needed in your society? Between churches? With people of other faiths? How might processes of reconciliation begin or be furthered in these situations?

Mission rooted in the love of God opens a new way of understanding through justice and reconciliation. Exclusion jeopardizes reconciliation, which is why justice and reconciliation cannot be separated. If there is to be reconciliation, relationships must be set right. This understanding of the mission of reconciliation is especially needed in contexts of injustice and violence. To seek justice and reconciliation is part of the mission of God, "who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18).

To foster reconciliation is a matter of survival. We cannot live together in this increasingly connected world without seeking to respect, understand and build bridges between one another. We must learn to think and act in multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-national and multi-religious ways, even when we feel the tension and insecurity that are part of this process.

An important way this reconciliation is lived out is through humanitarian assistance and development with people of different faiths, as regularly occurs through the LWF work of World Service. Religious and cultural practices can both inhibit and enhance this work; they can subjugate as well as liberate. Most religious faiths and traditions favor humanitarian assistance and development. An inter-faith response to human need is often the most appropriate response, and can be more easily accomplished than cooperation in theology or institutional arrangements. Fundamentalism leading to fanaticism exists in all religious traditions, and often obstructs inter-faith cooperation. Through working together to meet human need, different faith traditions can learn from and about each other, as they live out their own commitment to peace and justice.

Interfaith dialogue

Emphasizing dialogue and reconciliation in mission is in direct contradiction to "crusading styles" of mission that seek to "win souls for Christ." Reconciliation as a healing process is a key emphasis when relating to people of other faiths. Many Lutherans have experienced that reconciliation can occur through interfaith dialogue as a healing process. Many others remain hesitant or are even opposed, regarding those of other faiths as the enemy, or at least as those whom Christians need to convert. The 1990 LWF Assembly clearly stressed the importance of interfaith dialogue:

Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is a joyful message of reconciliation, it is deeply dialogical in character and encourages us to enter into conversation with and witness to people of other faiths or no faith, boldly and confidently.¹⁰

Interfaith dialogue is grounded in the dialogical nature of the Christian faith. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit and our faith expresses itself in dialogue with God through prayer and dialogue with our neighbor. Our faith is based on God having taken the initiative of entering into dialogue with humanity. God did this in an unparalleled, concrete manner in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God in our world. In order to enter into dialogue with us, Jesus Christ became a person like us, offering us salvation through his life, death and resurrection. This universal saving event in Jesus Christ is central for Christians and the basis for interfaith encounter in dialogue, prayer and living together. Dialogue is not simply an interaction of words, but living daily under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian, therefore, should be challenged to engage in dialogue with those of different faith convictions.

A Muslim theologian tells of a dialogue among three Jews:

When does the night end and the morning begin? This question was once discussed among three Jewish rabbis. The first suggested that the night ends in the moment when one can distinguish the mountains from the night sky. The other responded that, no, the new day was there when one could tell the difference between branches and leaves of a tree. The third rabbi listened to them and thought for a long time. Then he said: "The night ends and the morning begins when it is bright enough to recognize your fellow human being as your brother or sister."¹¹

Did the rabbi go too far by suggesting that we are able to look at each other as brothers or sisters? Are brothers and sisters only those who are of the same faith? As children of God, we are encouraged by God to discern the human face, the uniqueness of each creature, for then we will refrain from harming each



other and begin to seek and live reconciliation concretely in a dialogue of life. Consider the following principles for interfaith dialogue, and add your own:

- Interfaith dialogue begins when we realize and accept that multi-religious societies are a worldwide reality today. Increasingly, people of different faiths are living and working together. In a growing number of families, members belong to different faiths. We live together as couples, as families, as colleagues, and care for the same neighborhood, the same world. Dialogue focuses on the life and space we share in common.
- Since God's reconciliation in Christ involves making right relationships with the whole of hu-

mankind and creation, Christians are obliged to promote reconciliation and justice with people of different faiths or of no religious affiliation in their specific contexts.

- Another religion can seem strange and evoke generalized mistrust, prejudice and discrimination. God is at work through Christ and the Spirit, even among those who do not confess Christ as Savior. Perhaps the mistake many Christians made was to tell so much about Christ instead of partaking of him, committing our lives to him, and building bridges from both sides.
 - We must counter the generalized mistrust that disturbs peace and poisons our relationships with those of different faiths. In a relational approach, all dialogue partners have something to offer. They seek to learn from each other and treat one another with respect and integrity. There must be a learning process to build up relationships of genuine friendship. Friends of different faiths will be creative in finding practices of love and mutual acceptance. Genuine dialogue moves beyond tolerance to appreciation.
 - Rather than beginning with statements and arguments over differences, dialogue should begin with listening to the partner with empathy and mutual appreciation.
- Try to understand the other's spirituality, religious experiences and practices, learn from them and share your own faith and understandings. In this way, we can grow together toward a reconciled diversity without feeling threatened.
 - Together with people of different religious convictions, we can develop a common vision of solidarity, respect, justice and compassion. This becomes especially important for our common work on human rights, as well as for addressing critical ethical, social, economic and political issues. This should be done with sensitivity toward the different social, political, cultural and religious experiences and beliefs.
 - We must challenge the ways in which groups often exploit religious differences for ideological purposes, including through violence and terror. Careful distinctions must be made between religion as a credible way of faith, and religion used as a tool for political purposes.
 - In some multi-faith situations, multilateral dialogue may be possible and necessary if genuine peace-making is to occur. In the Middle East, for example, Lutherans have taken the lead in an ongoing dialogue among Christians, Jews and

In February of 2002 an inter-religious peace rally was held in Kandi (Sri Lanka) just days before the ceasefire was declared. Over 10,000 people came from many districts—Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils with a large number of Buddhist monks, Catholic clergy, Hindu and Muslim dignitaries. Thousands of people walked the roads of Kandi in silent protest against the war and pleaded for peace. A Catholic priest read a statement of the religious peace committee. Buddhist priests recalled the teachings of Buddha, and a Hindu priest addressed the gathering in Tamil, pledging his support for peace.¹²

Muslims. This can include mediation, conflict resolution, transformation, counseling, comforting, confession, forgiving and being forgiven, and working for conditions that will lead to just and lasting peace.

- Develop further Lutheran theological perspectives for dialogue through the LWF and other ecumenical bodies. How can people of different religions get along according to agreed upon principles of pluralism, and undergirded by a theology of inter-religious friendship and reconciliation?

Transformation through dialogue

In interfaith dialogue we need to be open to new personal, cultural and social experiences. As we engage in sincere and honest dialogue, we ourselves are transformed. This is consistent with a transformational understanding of mission. In interfaith dialogue our eyes may be opened, we ourselves may be “converted,” as was Peter in relation to Cornelius, a captain in the Roman army (Acts 10:1–33). Cornelius held another faith and his historical, ethnic, cultural and social background was quite at odds with Peter’s.

The story is traditionally interpreted as a story about the “conversion” of Cornelius. Yet...it is clear that it is a conversion of both, Peter and Cornelius. While the conversion of Cornelius has to do with accepting Jesus Christ as the Lord, Peter’s has to do primarily with a radical change of attitudes that resulted in accepting that all human beings are equal in the sight of God. Peter’s horizon was enlarged by the encounter. It gave him a

new perspective of reality; it transformed his understanding and appreciation of God’s grace and presence in human society. His eyes were opened to the fact that God’s grace and love are gift for all, without discrimination. Equality among all human beings is the gracious gift of God. Therefore, no one can be denied it without violating God’s intention.¹³

What does the encounter/dialogue between Peter and Cornelius mean for us today?

From dialoguing to praying together?

Increasingly, Lutherans are being challenged to reflect together on what it means to act and pray together with people of other faiths, especially for the reconciliation and healing of the world. Some have found this more compelling than rational discussion of different beliefs.

Prayer is a spiritual bridge which relates us to others no matter how far apart they may be...prayer is God’s activity in us rather than our activity in relation to God. ...Muslims’ prayer is the core of their religious life and is one of the five pillars of Islam. In Judaism, prayer is one of the most dominant elements... Prayer creates among believers a bond of love and mutual understanding which in turn creates a sense of unity. Prayer is also a symbol of equality for all people who, without any racial, social and cultural discrimination stand before their Lord.¹⁴

If all human beings are equal before God, if God’s love and grace is for all, if the Holy Spirit acts beyond the Christian church, if the healing of the world is a concern we share with people of many faiths, should we not be open to the possibility of praying together with those who do not share our Christian faith?

What kinds of theological bases or guidelines are needed for the possibility of interfaith prayer?

What kind of witness would this make to the world? Admittedly, many Christians who accept interfaith dialogue would disagree with the notion of interfaith prayer. Yet, in times of deep crisis, such as after September 11, 2001, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others came together to pray.

Mission and interfaith dialogue

In interfaith dialogue, we can discover that God's mission is greater than the mission of the church.¹⁵ Mission that seeks to share power and open eyes will recognize that God is already present and at work in a given context. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we may be surprised to discover a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of reconciliation as a healing and saving process.

Some assume that interfaith dialogue and mission are mutually exclusive. Sometimes Christian churches are afraid

of losing their Christian identity or doubting their own faith if they dialogue with people of other faiths. Such dialogue can be risky; we risk losing our safe haven, "the pulpit" of our monologue in order to enter into dialogue. We do not know in advance what direction it will take nor what the results may be. Perhaps even some "heresies" will arise. But, it is the Holy Spirit who moves us to take the risk, to move from monologue to enriching and potentially transforming dialogue.

Dialogue includes my witness and that of my dialogue partner. It is only possible if my dialogue partner and I have a clear position (witness) and are open to self-criticism. Our faith identity and convictions are not an obstacle, but rather a condition for a committed dialogue. There is likely to be an ongoing tension between being genuinely open to the other and commitment to one's own beliefs. This is especially the case insofar as religious beliefs are absolute claims. Christian mission is not incompatible with dialogue, especially when we understand mission in terms of reconciliation:

We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.¹⁶

What additional tensions and questions concerning the relationship between dialogue and mission should the LWF further explore and clarify?

Notes

¹ *Together in God's Mission: A LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission*, LWF Documentation 26 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ *The LWF Nairobi Mission Consultation Report*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ E. Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, vol. 2 (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979), p. 257.

⁷ *Together in God's Mission*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 9.

⁸ Rosa Celeste Camba, "The Issue of Reconciliation in the Philippine Context and in Asia," in Jochen Motte & Thomas Sandner (eds.), *Justice and Reconciliation* (Wuppertal: Foedus Verlag, 2000), p. 90.

⁹ Wolfram Kistner, "Reconciliation and Justice," in *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Official Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly*, LWF Report No 28/29 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1990), p. 83.

¹¹ Kistner, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 77.

¹² Religious Perspectives on Human Rights E-Newsletter, vol. 4 no. 9, February 25, 2002, p. 2, www.ahrchk.net/rghr.

¹³ Ishmael Noko, "Foreword," in Roland E. Miller and Hance A. O. Mwakabana (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Theological & Practical Issues*, LWF Studies 3 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁴ Sebouth Sarkissian, "Ephesians 2:12–22," in *Current Dialogue* 26 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, June 1994), pp. 58f.

¹⁵ *Together in God's Mission*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 8.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 488.



E. Removing Barriers that Exclude



In our churches and societies, barriers of discrimination continue to exclude people with physical or mental disabilities. Those affected by HIV/AIDS face additional kinds of discrimination. How do barriers of discrimination challenge what it means to be the church? How does Christ's transforming power break down these barriers, as well as those based on race, ethnicity, caste, age, or gender? What should we be doing to remove them? Where should human rights efforts focus? The historical wounds of exclusion tend to be deep and festering. How can ruptured relationships with those who have been excluded be healed?

Iara's cry

Listen with your heart. I want to tell you my story. This is a story of millions of people, but at the same time, it is just my story. I am privileged because I can write and you can read. I want to tell this story—no more secrecy, no more silence. Keeping silent only makes things worse.

*I am a person who has been excluded many times in her life. Many barriers have prevented me from fully participating in church and society, or from entering the hearts of people. Once, a long time ago, I thought this was **my** problem. Then I came to a point in my life when I realized that I am but one among millions. I have a condition that makes people avoid me. This condition makes people think, when they first meet me, that I am neither beautiful nor intelligent. When they see me, their fears and prejudices rise within them.*

What condition do you think Lara has? Why do you think people exclude and avoid her? Why do you think she is so passionate about telling her story fully and openly? Can you relate a similar story of exclusion? Name other conditions people have that lead to their avoidance and rejection by others.

Barriers that exclude

Some people are excluded because of their religion. There are parts of the world where Christians or Muslims, Jews or Hindus exclude one another. Some people are excluded because of the color of their skin, others because of their ethnic background. On these bases, they are considered inferior. Some, like the Dalits of India, are considered “outcasts,” excluded even by the gods.

There are those who are isolated because they suffer from a chronic illness, such as HIV/AIDS. Others are excluded because they are obese, have facial scars, or are intellectually disadvantaged. Still others are shut out because they are gay or lesbian.

What kinds of conditions serve as a basis for excluding people in your culture? In your church?

Lara's story

I was born December 15, 1960 in southern Brazil. As a baby, I contracted polio (Poliomyelitis or Infantile Paralysis). My legs were twisted and weak because my muscles were affected. I was the victim of a worldwide polio epidemic which lasted from 1940 until 1960. In Brazil, at that time, we had a polio vaccine, but a baby had to be eight months old to receive it, and I was only six months old. Later, Dr. Sabin developed a vaccine that could also be given to newborn children.

My whole life has been affected by this. I learned to walk very late, after my first bone and muscle transplant. I cannot recall all the pain of being in a hospital for 20 days and for 45 days in a cast, but I can recall my mother's unconditional presence, love, hope and patience. One of the most painful images I carry in my soul is the moment when the nurses came to take me to the operating room. I was clinging to my mother's neck, screaming with horror.

After this surgery I began my rehabilitation. Three times a week I went to a physiotherapist to exercise my legs and learn how to walk. I was four years old when I had the first experience of standing on my own feet and walking.

While I was living with my family and friends with whom I grew up I felt completely loved and equal. Of course, I could not climb trees or ride a bike, but I had developed other skills. The trouble began when I went to school and felt different. My legs were not growing at the same rate as my body. My right leg and foot were very damaged. So, I walked differently. I limped! Reason enough for other children to give me nasty nicknames. I was

marginalized, discriminated against and alone. At this point in my life I decided that I would find friends and try to overcome being marginalized and alone. I also realized I would always have enemies. Tough realization for a seven-year-old girl!

Why did other children not accept lara as she was? Why did they set up barriers that marginalized her and made her feel alone? What forces create these kinds of barriers?

Whence these barriers?

In telling our stories, we connect with the pain and the healing power of honest memory. Being open about a problem is the first step towards overcoming the barriers that people erect to exclude those who are different. Understanding the nature of the barriers is an essential step in the process of eventually breaking them down. We need to know how each one of us, because of our biases, may have helped build these barriers.

Unlike lara, many children cannot point to a similar incident in their lives. They are excluded because of the way they look from the day of their birth. They are marginalized or even hated because of their ethnic background or appearance. For them, the barrier exists before they are born. The barriers that people erect to exclude others can last for centuries.

In some cultures, there are myths that explain why some children are born disabled, disfigured or diseased. Some Christians have suggested that people suffer disability or disease because of human sin. They trace the problem back to the sin and curse in Genesis 3. Bible passages such as Deuteronomy 28:6ff. are used to interpret sickness, insanity and disabilities as being God's punishments.

Jesus has quite a different answer. In John 9:2, the disciples follow a popular

interpretation of such disabilities and ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The disciples assumed that blindness was not part of the natural order, but a punishment of God. These popular beliefs of Jesus' day were perpetuated to exclude such people as "sinners." Even today, afflicted people sometimes say, "What did I do to deserve this?"

Jesus tells his disciples that sin is not the cause of a disability such as blindness. These conditions can be part of the natural order of things and used by Christ to reveal God's presence and compassion—whether they are removed or remain. All human beings are created in the image of God, an image that is expansive and inclusive enough to embrace male and female, varying degrees of ability, diverse shapes and appearances, different ages and colors.

lara has this to say about the painful ways that healing texts in the Bible are often used:

When I think of these texts, I think of the other people with disabilities who were not cured. How did they feel? Did they think their faith was not enough? Or were they not worthy of being healed?... Such stories present problems for people with disabilities, because we are seeking full participation as we are. If we have to wait for our bodies to be restored, we might never be able to participate. ... Sometimes I believe it would have been better if Jesus had not healed all these people, but instead just blessed them and sent them home with the disability and with support. His example would change people's prejudices.

What causes these barriers to exist in people's minds and lives? What reasons are given in your culture for keeping away from people who are different? What kind of popular beliefs or stories are told to justify excluding people?

One text I like is of the woman who was bent over for 18 years (Lk 13:10–17). Jesus calls this woman who is disabled “a descendent of Abraham.” He gave her the dignity and power to be among others. I call this text and the healing of the blind man (Jn 9:1.10) “almost perfect texts” because they really put people with disabilities at the center. They show our humanity, the image of God that we possess with our disability. But I wonder why Jesus healed them? The best answer I have heard is from a friend of mine, an old pastor who said to me: “Jesus healed them because he loved them so much.” This is what brings me consolation even though it does not give me a complete answer. Clearly, Jesus did not heal people so that they would be more acceptable, but because he could feel their suffering and because he loved them. He feels our pain and loves us just as much, whether or not our disability remains.

How have you heard biblical stories about people with disabilities interpreted in hurtful ways? How would you challenge this?

Barriers based on race, ethnicity, caste, or gender

Major barriers arise through the forces of racism and ethnocentrism. In the strict definition of the terms, these two negative forces are quite different in their origins, even if the effects are similar. Ethnocentrism is the belief that “my” nation or people is the best or special, is “chosen” in some way, and has a culture that is to be kept pure or undiluted by other cultures. This is often heightened when new immigrants arrive, and can lead to xenophobia (hatred of foreigners).

Racism is an even more insidious ideology. It is based on the false belief that

“races” actually exist and can be identified by biological differences between peoples—skin color, facial features and type of hair. Although originally claimed to be based on science, it is a belief that has been totally discredited by genetics, but one that still persists in popular thought. The most insidious part of this is the belief that some “races” are inferior to others, intellectually, morally and culturally. Racist structures and power relations have then been built up on the basis of this ideology.

In the technical sense of the term outlined above, there are no “races” in the Bible. In the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11), when God divides up the peoples of earth, God does so on the basis of “tongue” not “race.” “Tongue,” referring to a discrete language, is the basis of a given culture. In other words, humanity is divided according to cultures not “races.” And as Acts 17:26–28 makes clear, peoples of all cultures seek God.

A related barrier of exclusion are social structures in which caste plays a central role. As set forth in an LWF statement at the 2002 meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the following key features contribute toward discrimination and human rights violations:

- The concept of “purity-pollution,” with certain social groups being regarded as “dirty,” and contact with them as being ritually or actually polluting.
- An inherited occupational role, typically the most menial and hazardous roles within society.
- Socially enforced endogamy, though with varying degrees of strictness.

These basic features naturally result in a whole range of discriminatory consequences, such as segregation in settle-

ment and housing patterns as well as discrimination in employment, education and access to health, social services and public places. There sometimes are violent reprisals against those who challenge the social hierarchy. These are features not only of casteism, but also of more blatant forms of sexism.

Over recent decades certain barriers of sexism have been removed in many societies, and women now are entering spheres of work and service previously closed to them. In some member churches, for example, the majority of those studying to become pastors are women. Yet in other societies, major barriers to women's full participation in church and society remain, and are reinforced by cultural traditions and religious beliefs, which tend to perpetuate subtle forms of discrimination throughout the world.

The affirmation of human dignity is the primary reason why a church must not tolerate injustices such as racism, apartheid, occupation, colonialism, sexism and casteism being perpetrated against human beings. We believe that each one of us is made in the image of God, and is precious, unique, irreplaceable and valuable. Especially since the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, human rights have been defined as a means of acknowledging and protecting human dignity. Human rights are an integral part of celebrating human worth by ensuring that human beings are treated as persons of value. The classical freedoms (of religion, opinion, expression, association, movement) that are part of an open democracy seek the same objective: to end policies and practices that treat any person as less than fully human.

Facing the challenges of diversity is inseparable from the challenges of building up a sense of nationhood, development and reconciliation. Nation building and reconciliation involve national integration,

which in turn entails bringing together various tribal, racial, ethnic, regional, or religious groups into a larger unit. Since racism was the mainstay of the colonial legacy, building a democratic society or nation involves minimizing the significance of the differences that prevail. Diversity, democracy and the acceptance of human rights mean rising above differences based on ethnocentrism or racism to a higher order where tribe, race, language or religious affiliation become less central in significance.

Which of these barriers has it been most important for your church to address? How is your church involved in removing these barriers in your society and church?

This was also an issue during Jesus' ministry. His contemporaries found the crossing and removing of boundaries of ethnicity, gender, or religion to be strange, even controversial. However, the rapid spread and eventual victory of Christianity over the many competing religions in the Roman Empire was in part due to its openness to the diversity of different groups and classes, to women and the downtrodden, and to those who for all kinds of reasons were outcast. The LWF and member churches must continue and intensify their pursuit of this commitment today.

Healing the pain of being excluded

Iara's story continues:

Then came adolescence and great suffering. Girls were talking about boys—and about their first kiss. Who would like to date a girl with a disability? So, again, I was sitting and observing and listening! I was that girl to whom all the other girls came to talk about dating. I

even learned how to kiss without ever being kissed. I was so alone. I wanted a boyfriend too. Nobody invited me to dance at a party, nobody invited me out, even though I was not really ugly!

You cannot imagine the pain of sitting in a restaurant with other friends when a guy sitting at another table started flirting with me. But, the moment I stood up and he saw my disability his face changed completely. He could not look at me. The pain of being different and disregarded led to doubts about being worthy. And that hurt deeply!

At the end of my teenage years, I went through another surgery, because the left leg grew longer than my right leg. I was almost unable to walk any more. I got a bone transplant from one leg to the other leg. My mother's presence was again my support.

Why is it difficult for people to accept those who are different? Why does difference threaten? How is the sexuality of persons with disabilities viewed in your community? How did Lara come to terms with her difference? Relate examples from your context of people facing similar situations because of where they come from, their cultures or lifestyles.

When I turned 20, I decided to become a pastor. That decision changed my life. I could drive to the seminary (after my car was modified) and join other students in our search for ways to liberate the world through such means as pastoral care, worship and social work. Even though the seminary, like many buildings in my country, was not physically accessible for people with disabilities, I felt welcomed. I experienced that I could be a lovable woman

In what ways does your church support people who experience this kind of alienation, exclusion and loneliness? How might it play a greater role in the healing process?

like others. This beautiful experience allowed me to feel whole, more capable, happier.

Here I also met my husband. We were good friends for many years, and after a long period of being apart, we realized that we would like to spend our life together. At this point in my life, I had the feeling of being able to face all of life's challenges and joys. I felt inside of me the power to fight for what I really believed in: to fight for people with disabilities and for the changes we need in order to live better.

More healing experiences were waiting for me. I became pregnant. In spite of the fact that some insensitive people were totally shocked, and asked me whether my baby would be born with the same disability, I really enjoyed seeing my belly grow and feeling a human being inside me. My family and friends were all celebrating with me. Our daughter Victoria, who was born in 1992, is the treasure of our lives.

Overcoming barriers

For the people of biblical times, barriers were a looming reality. One of the greatest dilemmas facing the early Christian church was the division between Jew and Gentile. This conflict came to a head at a showdown in Jerusalem. One faction said that a (male) person had to be circumcised to become a genuine Christian (Acts 15:5). St. Paul insisted that after Christ had come, people did not need to keep the old Jewish law, but to have faith in Christ as the revelation of God, whether the person was male or female, Jew or Gentile. Paul was countering a Jewish form of ethnocentrism.

This barrier between Jew and Gentile goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures and has been used, also by the church, to

justify excluding people quite ruthlessly. Christians have often viewed themselves as God's chosen people—as an extension of God having chosen Israel. As God's chosen people, the Israelites believed they should dispossess the indigenous Canaanites of their land, and exclude them from being an integral part of their community. These indigenous people were considered outcasts. No one should ever marry a Canaanite (according to Ezra 9:1–4) and mix “holy seed” with the peoples of the land. No Moabite is ever to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:3–6; see also the Bible study on Ruth 4).

This could be called “we are a superior Christian people” ideology. It was associated with many of the invasions of indigenous lands by European peoples—the Pilgrims and their descendants in North America, the Boer Trek in Africa, the invasion of Australia by the British. The invaders believed that, as Christians, they were superior to the so-called “natives.”

Was this ideology part of the experience of the church in your culture? Does this ideological barrier still exist, even in your church? Where especially is this a problem today?

When St. Paul and his followers faced this problem, the answer was unequivocal. In Ephesians 2, it is clearly stated that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, between one people and another, has been broken down by Christ. Christ has overcome the barriers created between peoples. Christ has created one new humanity, reconciling both sides to God (see the Bible study on Ephesians 2:13–23).

As far as God is concerned, all peoples are reconciled to God and part of one humanity. There should be no barriers that exclude people from God and the

blessings of the peace gained by Jesus Christ. Yet, our world is full of peoples who exclude each other. Most invading peoples still have not reached reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of the land. While the process has begun in countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, it is far from complete.

If Christ was the mediator who effected reconciliation with God, what should churches, especially through the LWF, be doing for the sake of reconciliation in society or between societies? How can the message of the cross of Christ be a means of effecting reconciliation and healing in contexts where the gospel is not accepted? (see also the chapter on the “The Mission of the Church in Multi-faith Contexts”)

Healing communities

How can communities contribute toward healing? These communities may be quite different, depending on the form of exclusion that has injured people. Such a community requires people who are willing to function as “healers,” working to be the healing hands of Christ in the community. Often these healers are people who themselves have been healed, who have experienced forgiveness, reconciliation and new life in Christ.

Iara formed one such community. As she says,

I began to invite people with disabilities to form a group. At first, it was very difficult to find them. We began meeting in March 1996. We each had a disability. Ronaldo, a worker, was 21 years old with cerebral palsy, and walked with difficulties with one cane. Maria Claudia, a physician with multiple sclerosis, was 38 years old and walked with great difficulty and dizziness. Ivanir, a 36-year-old housekeeper, also had multiple sclerosis and walked with one stick. Rosalie, a 52-year-old housekeeper, had only five percent of normal

sight and was considered legally blind. Rigoberto, a 23-year-old painter, had been living in a wheelchair for three years after being paralyzed from his neck down due to a bullet wound.

At first, we were a very strange parade for the other groups which met at the church at the same time. We could not find parking places for the cars that transported our group. We had many steps to overcome, because the building was not accessible. People asked me many weird questions. "This guy looks crazy. Is he all right?" or "What happened to that lady?" "Why are you meeting here?" As time passed, our group befriended members from other groups. They began to help us to get out of our cars and they saved spaces in the parking lot.

Our meetings were very sacred. We talked about our pain, our stories, our families, our experiences of being different and because of this, our experiences of discrimination. We read some Bible texts in a very different way with our unique eyes—through our pain, our experience and our hope. We interpreted them differently. We realized that Christ suffers when differently-abled bodies are rejected, are excluded, not loved. We performed many exercises that helped us to feel healed even though the disability remained.

Surprisingly, we reconnected with the image of God that people and the circumstances of exclusion had almost taken from us. We are God's images. God is so immense. God can embrace all diversity in bodies and minds. We

are created in the image of God. Our bodies were again whole—sacred, imperfect bodies, but whole. Our intimacy with God and with others was restored. We were not cured, but we were healed.

This is the story I would like to share with you. I hope you keep this story close to your hearts and remember all people who are excluded. Can you see any reason for segregation, separation or exclusion? The moment that we have our needs fulfilled we feel whole. The moment we are accepted the world is much richer. The moment our difficulties are heard and possible solutions found we can live like others. The miracle is not getting rid of the pain, the disease or the disability. The miracle is being accepted, having our needs met and to participate in the beauty and mystery of life.

In the face of HIV/AIDS¹

Within the global Lutheran communion, the suffering and anguish caused by HIV/AIDS impact all dimensions of our life together. When one part of the body of Christ suffers, all of the body suffers. In particular, HIV/AIDS challenges our theology and ecclesiology—requiring an honest and humble reassessment of how we actively reach out towards—or exclude—those whom Christ claims as his own.

A prophetic call to the church is coming from those suffering from HIV/AIDS, many of whom have been isolated or deliberately excluded from the community. As such persons share their stories and their lives, and as the church

It is now common knowledge that in HIV/AIDS it is not the condition itself that hurts most (because many other diseases and conditions lead to serious suffering and death), but the stigma and the possibility of rejection and discrimination, misunderstanding and loss of trust that HIV positive people have to deal with.

Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha, Anglican Church of Uganda

dares to listen, the church can be moved to repent of how it has sinned against those who are affected by HIV/AIDS, due to fear, lack of information, stigmatization, or a failure to act.

As a church we are often uncomfortable sitting at the side of a person or family with HIV/AIDS because this means facing so many related issues that make us uneasy, and around which many defensive theological and moralistic barriers have been built. These barriers distance the church from those who are most in need of care and acceptance in times of deep fear and grief. The church is hindered from speaking out prophetically on behalf of those who are suffering or whose dignity is violated. Responding with compassion to persons living with and affected by HIV/AIDS means challenging and moving beyond boundaries that have kept us from loving one another and seeking justice for all who are made in the image of God.

As churches, we need to become safe places where people can speak about these realities without fear. We must dare to proclaim the gospel with a full voice and live out God's gracious intention of abundant life for all. God's grace frees people of faith to break out of accustomed boundaries and taboos, to challenge irresponsible sexual practices, and to move into new perceptions of themselves and of God's healing activity in the world.

The healing process

If we analyze stories of healing, we can recognize a number of key stages in the healing or reconciliation process that we need to consider. Healing takes time as we work through the process of overcoming barriers. These steps are likely to include:

- **Listening to the story.** If we are to become a healing community we

need, like Christ, to listen empathetically to the stories of those who have been excluded in our community. We need to experience their pain, their wounds, their rejection. Often that is difficult, because we have developed negative attitudes toward such people. To begin the healing process, therefore, we need to take a risk and move beyond our own comfort zones. We need to be good listeners.

- **Probing behind the story.** We also need to probe behind the story to understand why certain groups have been excluded from our congregation, our local community, or our society. Are the fears and attitudes that caused their exclusion prevalent in our church as well as in society? Have we used our theology, our Lutheran traditions or even the Bible as a basis for excluding them? For this step, we need honest analysis.
- **Acknowledging the truth.** One of the hardest things to do is to confess that we as individuals, as a Christian community, or as a society, have been part of the reason why some people are alienated, excluded or marginalized. Public acknowledgement of the truth of past prejudices is vital if there is to be reconciliation. Some of us need to apologize publicly, for example, to indigenous peoples we or our ancestors have dispossessed and excluded over the years. Honest confession is crucial if there is to be healing.
- **Building a new community.** An authentic new community—or as St. Paul calls it, “a new human-

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ity”— consists of both those who we once excluded and those who were guilty of excluding them. The task of restoration involves more than a public apology or formal acceptance. It also involves the process of building a new community in which all members are fully accepted and affirmed as participants in the life and vision of the community.

- **Healing rites.** One of the most powerful ways to help build community is to celebrate rites of healing, either separately or con-

nected with the Eucharist. Healing is needed for people on both sides of the barrier. Those who have been excluded, abused or marginalized have wounds that need healing, memories that burden them, fears that still threaten. Those who have excluded others, either recently or in the past, need to acknowledge the truth, confess the wrong and ask for forgiveness. Through the healing power of Christ, especially through the Eucharist, communities can be brought together in Christ.

Where is such healing of barriers especially needed in your church? In the LWF? How can this occur?

Notes

¹ What follows is adapted from the preface to the LWF Action Plan on HIV/AIDS [http://lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/HIVAIDS-Action-plan.pdf].

F. The Church's Ministry of Healing



The healing of persons has long been considered part of the church's pastoral and diaconal calling. For Lutherans, the ministry of healing is grounded in the Word, sacraments and prayer. Some churches have focused on healing through prayer and exorcism, whereas others view these practices with suspicion. Most churches are involved in healing through various diaconal ministries. What have been the experiences in our churches, and what can we learn from each other? How is individual healing related to wider social issues? What is the difference between healing and curing? How should we as churches be addressing particular healing challenges in our world today?

This topic is certainly not new to the church, but it is one to which many Lutheran churches have been slow or reluctant to respond. Many churches, and the members within them, have had significant experiences with healing and healing ministries that have not been shared with others. This focus provides a real opportunity for us to discover elements of the Christian faith which have been ignored in mainstream churches for too long. This includes neglected aspects of our own tradition as Lutherans.

How does your church tend to view healing ministries?

A brief sketch of the healing ministry of the church

From the very beginning, healing has been part and parcel of the proclamation of the gospel:

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, ... curing every disease and every sickness (Mt 9:35).

Jesus sent his disciples to do likewise. He gave “them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,” and actually “sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:1–2; also see Lk 10:9). This was a mandate that the risen Christ reconfirmed (Mk 16:18).

As recorded in Acts, the apostles paid heed to this command to heal. Peter heals a man lame from birth who lay at the entrance to the temple (Acts 3:1–8), and at Lydda, he heals Aeneas who was

paralyzed (Acts 9:32–35). Peter also raises the dead Tabitha at Joppa (Acts 9:36–41). Ananias heals Paul from his blindness at Damascus (Acts 9:17–19). At Lystra, Paul himself heals a man unable to walk (Acts 14:8–11), and on the island of Malta, the sick father of Publius (Acts 28:8–9). Paul also raises a dead person, the young Eutychus at Troas (Acts 20:9–12). These are only some of the examples of healing in the ministry of the apostles. Beyond this, there are several collective accounts of similar activities,¹ as well as the reference in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 to healing as a charismatic gift.

It is striking to realize how important the ministry of healing was in the writings of the Church Fathers. They repeatedly addressed the matter of healing in ways that reflected their argument with what was then the very popular healing cult of Asclepius, who was revered as “the savior” throughout the Hellenistic world. In confrontation with this cult, the Early Church had to articulate what was distinctive about Christ. The church confessed Christ as “the Savior of the world” in order to indicate that Christ actually overcame even death itself. In light of this, the conclusion of church historian Adolf von Harnack is not surprising, when he stated that “only” by proclaiming the gospel “as the gospel of the Savior and of salvific healing, in the comprehensive sense in which this was understood by the Early Church,” will Christianity remain faithful to its roots.²

Although the concern for actual healing abated slowly but steadily in the following centuries, the church became increasingly concerned with caring for those who were sick or in need. The biblical model for this are the seven deacons (see Acts 6:1–6), who were installed by the Apostles at Jerusalem specifically to take care of the needs of the widows who were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31–46) also

How are Lutherans responding to popular healing cults today?

served as a decisive call to such activity: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

Remarkable among the early initiatives was the *Basiliads*, an institution famous for the care of those who were poor, sick, homeless, orphaned or widowed. Founded by Bishop Basil the Great in the fourth century at Caesarea, it became the model on the basis of which many similar establishments were built by many cities in the Christian world throughout the Middle Ages. Numerous religious orders were organized to staff these institutions and to care for the people. Besides this, special donations were solicited, which was to become a practice of special importance in the churches of the Reformation.

In the nineteenth century, the diaconal movement developed with numerous programs and institutions to care for those adversely affected by the Industrial Revolution. They often were inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), as was the medical missions movement which came into existence around the same time. When medicine became a more scientific art, it was Protestant missions, in close cooperation with dedicated, pious physicians and other people of good will, who developed the concept of medical missions, literally for “the Healing of the Nations.”³ While diaconal institutions represented the healing ministry of the church, it was the medical missions, especially in the beginning, that re-emphasized the actual physical aspect of healing. This was due to the fact that medicine had reached the point of being able to eradicate infectious diseases, such as malaria, diphtheria, smallpox and leprosy by identifying the disease-causing organisms that later led to the discovery of new, potent drugs and the development of safe, painless surgery.

Today healing has, once again, come to the fore in churches. While some

churches have experienced prayer-healing movements, others have studied questions of the healing ministry in great detail, providing local congregations and health professions with resources, guidelines, material and many possibilities for action.⁴ For some Lutheran churches, especially in the South, involvement in non-medical, liturgical healing activities has become a major concern, such as the Malagasy Lutheran Church’s long-established Shepherd Ministry.⁵

Through what institutional forms is this healing ministry expressed in your church?

Luther, Lutheranism and healing

In a personal, highly disclosive letter to his wife, Luther once wrote:

Master Philip truly had been dead, and really like Lazarus has risen from death. God, the dear father listens to our prayers. This we see and touch, yet we still do not believe it. No one should say Amen to such disgraceful unbelief of ours.⁶

When in the summer of 1540 his dear colleague and friend Philip Melanchthon fell seriously ill and was feared to die, Luther was called to his bedside where he found him in a comatose state. While Luther prayed, Melanchthon regained consciousness. Luther later referred to this: “We have prayed ... people back to life, [like] Philip at Weimar, whose eyes were broken already.”⁷

In his letters of spiritual counsel, Luther appears to have been far more familiar with praying for healing and exorcism than is commonly known. For him such prayer was always understood as the prayer of the church. When asked how to deal with “a mad person,” Luther recommended:

Pray fervently and oppose Satan with your faith, no matter how stubbornly he resists. About ten years ago we had an experience in this neighborhood with a very wicked demon, but we succeeded in subduing him by perseverance and by unceasing prayer and unquestioning faith. The same will happen among you if you continue in Christ's name to despise that derisive and arrogant spirit and do not cease praying. By this means I have restrained many similar spirits in different places, for the prayer of the Church prevails at last.⁸

Share some of these healing experiences from your church. What issues do they raise?

How close this is to the experience of many churches of the Lutheran communion, especially in countries of the South. For them, as for Luther, many diseases have not only material but also spiritual causes, and thus need to be treated accordingly.

The Reformers also referred to healing in relation to the church's more conventional teachings. For example, Luther occasionally referred to confession and the Lord's Supper as "healing medicines." Melancthon employed the term "healing" when speaking about "soothing the doubts of troubled consciousness" or "mending the church community" that threatened to break apart. More than a generation later, the authors of the Formula of Concord used "healing" to refer to the "regeneration and renovation" of fallen humanity through the Holy Spirit. Regarding the church:

Until the Last Day, the Holy Spirit remains with the holy community, or Christian people. Through it he [God] gathers us, using it to teach and proclaim the Word ...⁹

Little of this has played a significant role in the subsequent development of

Lutheran theology, at least until recently. This has also led to an inadequate understanding of the natural world and the corporeality of life, despite what the confessional writings clearly state:

We believe, teach and confess that ... God not only created the body and soul of Adam and Eve ..., but also our bodies and souls ... and God still acknowledges them as his handiwork Furthermore, the Son of God assumed into the unity of his person this same human nature, though without sin, and thus took on himself not alien flesh, but our own, and according to our flesh has truly become our brother. ... Thus Christ has redeemed our nature as his creation, sanctifies it as his creation, quickens it from the dead as his creation, and adorns it gloriously as his creation.¹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once analyzed this atrophy of Lutheran theology:

Before the light of grace everything human and natural sank into the night of sin, and now no one dared to consider the relative differences within the human and the natural, for fear that by their so doing grace as grace might be diminished. ... Christ Himself entered into the natural life, and it is only through the incarnation of Christ that the natural life becomes the penultimate which is directed towards the ultimate.¹¹

It is time for this atrophy to be redressed. Healing always has a bodily dimension. Even healing that is mental or spiritual, such as the healing of mind or of memories, is a healing that affects corporeal, embodied beings.

Healing as power encounter

Obviously healing is not a Christian prerogative. In all cultures and at all times,



people who suffered from diseases have regained health and strength. Among those who became well again, some experienced this in very ordinary ways over an extended period of time or due to well-established remedies. For others, the healing occurred quite suddenly, in ways not explainable, and thus was spoken of as “miraculous.” Regarding such miraculous claims, Origen wrote in the third century:

Were I to ... admit, that a demon, Asclepios by name, has the power to heal physical illness, then I could remark to those who are astounded ... by this healing, that this power to heal the sick is neither good nor evil, that it is a thing which is bestowed not only upon the righteous, but upon the godless as well. ... Nothing divine is revealed in the power to heal the sick in and of itself.¹²

Healings by themselves do not prove Christ’s authority. Even the healings of Jesus were doubted (*cf.* Mt 12:22ff.). For

example, the Pharisees questioned their revelatory quality: “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons,” (verse 24) to which Jesus replied, “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?” (verse 27).

Because healings are ambiguous, they raise significant and uneasy challenges for churches and their theology. Is healing a natural phenomenon, which can be stimulated by means that are not only medical? Or, is healing the outcome of a power encounter, a victorious fight with demons and evil spirits, “in the name of Jesus!” as J. C. Blumhardt did in the nineteenth century, and as is done in many churches today?

It may be misleading to pose this as an “either/or” question. Looking to Luther for guidance, we find a surprisingly sober-minded, pragmatic answer. Luther demands first a proper diagnosis in order to discern carefully the specific disease in question. Then he encourages one to act accordingly.

If the physicians are at a loss to find a remedy, you may be sure that this is not a case of ordinary [disease]. It must, rather, be an affliction that comes from the devil, and must be counteracted by the power of Christ and with the prayer of faith. This is what we do, and what we have been accustomed to do, for a cabinet maker here was similarly afflicted with madness and we cured him by prayer in Christ's name.¹³

Many people throughout the centuries, within and beyond Christianity, have experienced and continue to experience healing as the victorious outcome of a battle of a life-granting, life-preserving power over life-threatening forces.

What does Lutheran theology have to say about this? How do local congregations and churches handle this? Do they foster such an understanding? Do they ignore it? Do they address it and help their members to come to terms with it in light of the gospel?

Perceiving healing as the outcome of a power encounter also demands an ability to discern the spirits. How and where is this to be gained? Where in the life and teaching of Lutheran churches do we find help for this? Are churches prepared to tackle the issue of good and evil spirits, which is not easily compatible with enlightened, scientific and secular understandings and medical practices? How might churches have more mutual exchanges on matters like this, without compromising the people involved?

Healing, curing and mending

One common attempt to respond to the above dilemma is with the motto: Humans cure—God heals. “Healing” here is seen as the work of the only true and liv-

ing God while “curing” describes what human activity seeks to achieve. But is this distinction really helpful? While its intention is to indicate that any healing is a gift of God, such a differentiation is highly problematic because it separates that which actually is one process. Why disgrace the natural healing process and demean the efforts of those seriously concerned with restoring health to people for the sake of a theological argument which only confirms the atrophy discussed above?

Luther's position was quite different. When explaining the First Article in his Small Catechism he bluntly declared:

I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me **and still sustains** my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind ...¹⁴

For him there was no doubt that the living God uses the healing potential inherent in biological life to sustain life. How then can there be a sharp distinction between healing and curing? When Christians confess that God has created the world and all that is therein, they are acknowledging God's ongoing creation. Therefore, the only distinction that should matter is that between “healing” as God's unique work and all the “treatments” applied by humans as responsible efforts to help healing come about.

This opens up a new approach toward the various healing arts, all of which will be welcomed as agents to enable healing, be they scientific, natural, spiritual, herbal, alternative or indigenous. At the same time their claims have to be tested sympathetically yet critically by those who are genuinely and solely committed to the ministry of healing. We must see to it that these means do not lead to death, but toward life abundantly (*cf.* Jn 10:10).

Healing and salvation

If the healing ministry of the church is understood as a commitment to bring about life abundantly, then this must be seen in relation to the wider aspects of life. As we have come to realize in recent years, it is often the broader context of individuals and their communities which needs to be healed. This requires awareness of the overall socio-economic conditions, the ecological context and sensitivity for how culture and gender are involved.

Discuss examples of how these wider factors, many of which are the foci of other Village Group discussions, contribute to health or illness.

Approaching healing in this way can bridge the gap between gospel proclamation and Christian service in the world, because in such an all-encompassing perspective of healing such a divide no longer holds. The healing ministry implies an inherent critique of both the church's proclamation and action. Any theology and preaching, however eloquent and entertaining, which is very "spiritual" but not geared toward bringing about palpable changes for the better, has to be questioned as to its appropriateness. Likewise, service can and should be seen by the church as a means of carrying out the church's witness in society. Thus, healing becomes a critical, challenging touchstone for the credibility of the church's whole ministry.

Do you agree with this? What would be the implications for how churches structure the work of proclamation and of service? What problems does this raise?

Living out the ministry of healing is more than pious words or social activ-

ism. It is simply following the footsteps of Jesus Christ and in so doing, learning to see with his eyes. The simple fact that Jesus *healed* clearly indicates that to him salvation had a bodily dimension, albeit without equating healing with salvation.

We are addressed by the Word of God as embodied persons. The Creator cared wholly for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:7ff.). When they strayed, the Creator did not lose sight of their bodily needs and wants. Clothes were provided for the naked (Gen 3:21). Later, the rules for a good life were revealed in the Torah, setting into motion the history of salvation. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and through him continued to live out the compassionate care for humanity by healing those who were ill, by feeding the hungry (Mt 9:10ff.; 14:13ff.; Mk 6:31ff.; Jn 6:1ff.), by listening to those who cried (Mt 15:21; Mk 10:13ff. and 46ff) and by comforting those who wept (Jn 11:33). Jesus really did care for people and their well-being, and took seriously their corporeality. In so doing he reinstated the God-likeness to them (Gen 1:26f.), he "healed" the rift between God and humanity.¹⁵

This of course did not mean that Jesus worshiped the body. At times he showed a certain disregard for it.

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire (Mt 18:8).

What matters and makes life worth living is not a perfect body but the way in which we enable others to live and stay alive. It is in this way that Jesus' healing miracles are significant.

To bring about life and life in abundance, sometimes occurs at the expense of the body, or even at the expense of an individual life. Jesus' death is the strongest point in case (see Jn 15:13). The

early Christians actually understood Jesus' passion and cross in this way by quoting from Isaiah 53:4: "He took our in-

How does this critique the perfect body ideologies of our times? How does this challenge all dehumanizing and exploitative structures, relationships, or practices?

firmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8:17). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross...by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24).

The cross makes us aware that the healing ministry of the church cannot consist of simply working to prolong life or to promote body concepts that favor strong, not mutilated, perfectly healthy bodies (and most probably those that are young and beautiful). Instead, the very task of this ministry is to reinstate the "God-likeness" to all men and women, children and adults, rich and the poor, the healthy and sick. It is to enable as many people as possible to live their lives in such a way that others can recognize the image of the living God in them, and that so that they may live and remain truly human until death.

To live the church's healing ministry means to witness to the corporeality of salvation. As the early African theologian Tertullian reminded his contemporaries, "The body is the pivot of salvation."¹⁶ But in seeking to bring about healing, we

Does this mean that healing efforts are not worth pursuing? That these efforts fail far more often than they accomplish their goal? What should the LWF be saying about the church's ministry of healing?

realize that we can never guarantee the results, neither in hospitals, churches, nor even in prayer circles. We become aware of the discrepancy between the enormous claim and the actual outcome of so many well-intended efforts. Very often healing does not take place in spite of all endeavors.

Rather than ignoring this dilemma, we must consciously face it, and thereby rise to our calling. Christians are asked sober mindedly and critically to distinguish between what really can be done here and now, always provisionally, and what cannot be achieved despite all good efforts. While continual defeat might well frustrate us, as Christians we can face this because we know for certain "that in hope we were saved" (Rom 8:24). Such "hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:5).

In this way we realize that healing is not synonymous with salvation. Salvation always transcends the realm of the empirical. As Christians our call is to bear witness to the redeeming power of faith in Christ, not to prove or demonstrate it. The church simply cannot claim to have control over healing as a demonstrative sign of God's presence and supreme power. To do so would be to deny Christian existence as life between the "here and now" and the "not yet" of salvation, and to turn into a healing sect. If the church does not bear this tension, it no longer bears witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Healing sometimes may be part and parcel of a salvific experience, but it is never at the will and disposal of the church. It is at God's disposal alone.

Notes

¹ See Acts 5:15–16; 8:6–7; 19:11–12; 28:9. Other references to “wonders and signs” of the apostles are found in Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3.

² Adolf v. Harnack, *Medizinisches aus der ältesten Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig, 1892), p. 111. See also Adolf v. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), esp. pp. 101–146.

³ J. Rutter Williamson and James S. Dennis, *The Healing of the Nations—A Treatise on Medical Missions, Statement and Appeal* (New York/London, 1899). For a comprehensive treatment see Christoffer H. Grundmann, *Gesandt zu heilen! Aufkommen und Entwicklung der aerztlichen Mission im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen Bd. 26* (Guetersloh: Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1992) [*Sent to heal! Emergence and Development of Medical Missions in the Nineteenth Century*, American edition in print]; Christoffer H. Grundmann, “Proclaiming the Gospel by healing the sick?—Historical and Theological Annotations on Medical Missions,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 14, no. 3 (July 1990), pp. 121–126.

⁴ For example, it is expected that in 2003 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will adopt a major social statement on health and healing.

⁵ See for instance, Peder Olsen, *Healing through Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), esp. pp. 26ff.; Larry Christensen, *The Charismatic Revival Among Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, Publishing House, 1976). For the activities of the Lutheran churches in America see *Anointing and Healing* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Church in America, 1962); Ralph E. Peterson,

A Study of the Healing Church and its Ministry: The Health Care Apostolate (New York: Lutheran Church in America, 1982); *Our Ministry of Healing—Health and Health Care Today* (Chicago: ELCA, 2001). About the Lutheran Church in Madagascar see: Peri Rasolondraibe, “Healing Ministry in Madagascar,” in *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, vol. 9 (Fall 1989), pp. 344–350. Other Lutheran initiatives are documented in *Health and Healing—The Report of the Makumira Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church* (Arusha: Medical Board of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, 1967); *Report of the Umpumulo Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church* (Mapumulo, South Africa, 1967). For a fairly comprehensive overview see Christoffer H. Grundmann, “Healing—A Challenge to Church and Theology,” in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XC, Nos. 356/357 (Jan./April 2001), pp. 26–40.

⁶ Weimar, July 2nd, 1540, in G. G. Krodel (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 208f.

⁷ Otto Clemen, *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1930), p. 293, #5407.

⁸ Letter to Pastor B. Wurzelmann, Nov. 2nd, 1535, in Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p. 42.

⁹ “The Large Catechism,” in Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 417. See also p. 460.

¹⁰ “Formula of Concord, Part I, Epitome, Article I, Original Sin,” in *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 466f.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Eberhard Bethge (ed.) (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 144f.

¹² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III, 25.

¹³ Letter to Severin Schulze, June 1st, 1545, in *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 52.

¹⁴ *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9) p. 345; italics added.

¹⁵ Solida Declaratio I (De peccato originis / Original Sin), par. 14, in *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 511.

¹⁶ E. Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection* (London: SPCK, 1960), p. 26.

G. Justice and Healing in Families



How do we minister to families when they become places of injustice and pain? How does our faith speak to changing realities of family, gender and sexuality? Given the significant cultural and generational differences in how we understand family life and sexuality, how can we talk about and learn to live with these differences as part of the one household of God?

Many kinds of families

Why should we as a communion of churches focus on families? Because it is in families that human beings are brought into the world, nurtured, supported emotionally and economically, and raised to participate in society. Here we discover what it means to be human. This is where we are loved and experience intimacy, meaning and joy, but also where we may experience pain, alienation and abuse. Families reflect all the ambiguities of what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God as good, but also to fall into sin. The heights and depths of the human condition are manifest in family life.

All cultures institutionalize certain understandings of marriage, family and gender, but across cultures, what constitutes a family varies considerably. A family usually is thought of as persons who are related to one another and who live together in a household. This might be a nuclear family, consisting of a couple living alone with or without children. It might be an extended family, made up of additional relatives (such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins) who live in the same home or neighborhood. Some families include members who are related not through blood, but through adoption. Due to death, divorce and remarriage, families may include a variety of stepchildren or stepparents. In some societies, more same-sex couples are forming families. "Family" can also refer to a group of people who are committed to share their lives, and who live together without being legally related, such as unmarried couples (whether heterosexual or homosexual), friends, or people living in religious communities.

What for you is "family"? What are the most important qualities or features of family?

However a family is demarcated has implications for who is included and who is excluded, and on what basis. Families can be hospitably open to others, or closed to those who do not belong. The boundaries of family can be experienced as oppressive and exclusive, especially by those who are single or do not fit a particular family norm.

Families are where we are expected to learn our basic sense of justice, especially of what is right and wrong, but they can also be places where blatant injustices rage, especially against those who are vulnerable. Families often need healing due to

How does your church minister to families under these circumstances? How should it?

the deep wounds members inflict upon one another, but families also can be healing havens from the ravages of economic, political and social stress. The silence over what occurs in family life, which is assumed to be private, can become a veil covering the pain and injustices that must be brought into the open if there is to be justice and healing in families.

While many families are content and closely knit, some are not. Indeed, every family has some problems. The private joys and pains of family life must be seen in relation to the wider cultural, social, political and economic realities. When wider social, economic and social systems are threatened or break down, those who do not fit the norm are blamed or seen as dangerous, such as those who are single, divorced, separated, or of a different lifestyle. Other family members, or the wider community, may exclude them on this basis.

Families under stress

There are many pressures on family life, which can contribute to broken relationships and divorce. Family tensions can be compounded by situations of affluence as well as poverty, by unemployment as well as too much work, by changing gender expectations and changing understandings and practices of sexuality. In many parts of the world, families have been subjected to colonialism, forced movement, retrenchment, exploitation, violence, conflict and persisting poverty. When societies are destabilized from every direction, it should be no surprise when there are dramatic increases in the numbers of street children, prostitutes, gangs, crime, rape, abortions, alcohol and drug abuse, child neglect, sexually-transmitted diseases and violence against women, children and other family members.

Consider the pressures of poverty and the resulting problems that the following family faces.

How are families under stress in your context?

"Excuse me; could you give me some money? My little baby is sick." A young woman, carrying her baby, was begging for money from the pastor. Nangula was an eighteen-year-old woman with a two-year-old baby. She also was pregnant. The twenty-five-year-old father of the boy has been living with Nangula since she was sixteen. They have never married. Their son's birth was never registered nor was he baptized.

Nangula's parents live two blocks from their daughter. There are five other siblings living at home, ranging in age from eight to twenty. The entire family is illiterate, although education is available. None of the family members currently have permanent jobs; in the past, they have only had jobs for brief periods of time. Begging is their chief source of income.

The family's physical condition is unhealthy since they often do not have enough money to buy food. They frequently get sick and require medical treatment. Their problems are compounded by the fact that they do not have proper clothing and housing. The family has few options to better their situation, even on a day-to-day basis. The government provides medical treatment only if they have proper papers such as birth certificates or identification cards. The government and church organizations will provide only small amounts of financial assistance. Jobs are difficult to secure. Due to their poor health, they also cannot do heavy work.

What is needed for there to be justice and healing in Nangula's family?

Families amid the HIV/AIDS crisis

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a poignant example of how these wider forces affect families. Across Africa, and increasingly in other areas of the world, the nightmare of HIV/AIDS is real. The disease affects not only the physical but also the social body, and millions of families within it. Hardly a family remains untouched by HIV/AIDS. The word not spoken is HIV/AIDS, and the sexual and other practices that spread it. Here at ground zero of humanity's deadliest cataclysm, the ultimate tragedy is that so many people do not know—or do not want to know—what is happening. The victims do not cry out. Doctors, clergy and obituaries do not give the killer its name. Families recoil in shame. Leaders shirk responsibility. The stubborn silence heralds victory for the disease: denial cannot keep the virus at bay.

It is in families that death from HIV/AIDS has its greatest impact. The future

of families is bleak in the midst of this pandemic. A loss of a parent, a sibling, a friend, colleague, child or spouse disrupts established family patterns and requires a caring community and ministry. The religious and social stigma is such that family members are subjected to great emotional distress, and carry a large burden of care for those affected. Family life is disrupted, children are orphaned. Families can no longer be sustained under its devastating power. Ironically, some traditional practices of family life may also contribute to its spread.

Although both men and women are affected, increasingly it is women, especially those who are young, who are at far greater risk of being infected through sexual intercourse. Social norms and gender inequality render it difficult for women and girls to negotiate safe sex or to have control over their partner's fidelity. Babies are unwittingly infected by their mothers. Two-thirds of the babies of HIV-positive mothers are born infected.

In light of these tragic realities, will there even be a future generation? Society's fittest, not its frailest, are the ones who die, leaving the old and the children behind. Grandparents and grandchildren are wailing; like Rachel, they refuse to be consoled until life has been genuinely restored (Mt 2:18).

What is needed for there to be justice and healing in families affected by HIV/AIDS? What kinds of cultural taboos need to be overcome if this is to occur? In your culture, who traditionally has taught the young about sexuality? How is this changing? What should be the church's role in this?

The church, as the household of God, needs to acknowledge that this is not just a problem "out there," but that many in our churches are living and suffering with HIV/AIDS. In this sense, it can be said that "the church has AIDS"! Healing is desperately needed so that those affected can be restored to relationships within their families, congregations and communities. We need to become instruments of God's redeeming love so as to confront and transform the stigmas and practices associated with HIV/AIDS.

This includes more open discussion of those practices that spread HIV/AIDS, especially unprotected sexual intercourse under conditions of gender inequality whether within and outside of marriage. Here, the primary ethical mandate is to refrain from doing what will harm the "neighbor" (here, the sexual partner and family members) and to take appropriate measures to protect and enhance the life of the neighbor. In the face of HIV/AIDS, other moral rules or cultural considerations may need to be overruled for the sake of this central mandate.

Especially in the face of this crisis, it is crucial for us to

- tell the truth about what is happening in our lives and communities,
- speak together as adults, youth and children about sexuality and responsible sexual practices,
- teach new ways for women and men to relate to one another, and especially responsible sexual behavior by males.

Changing roles of women and men in families

In many societies, gender roles have undergone significant changes in recent years, especially in quest of greater equity and mutuality between women and men. Women in many parts of the world have acquired a new sense of identity and power, while most men still need to find an identity that is not lived out by exercising dominating power over women, which can lead to abuse. Changing gender expectations and roles is a challenge that most men have only begun to incorporate into their lives and identity as men, including by assuming more responsibilities in home and family. Women still tend to carry the primary responsibility here, in addition to their work outside the home. There also have been significant increases in the proportion of female-headed households, but often with inadequate social, economic, or church support for them and their families. Women in many parts of the world continue to lack

My husband used to work in a far away city and came home only once a month. But a year ago, he came home and did not return to work because he was sick. I looked after him until he died. When I learned that he had AIDS, I knew that I too would soon have it. I am not sick yet but I am worried for our young children who are now, in my opinion, already virtually orphans.

John and Anna have been married for forty years in what their society considers a traditional marriage. He has been employed outside the home, she has not. Their unmarried daughter Leila, who also has a promising career, has lived with three different men, and now is pregnant with her second child. Anna, meanwhile, has tried to keep her children from knowing how many times John has physically beaten her in recent years.

What are the most important gender-related challenges in your society? How is your church addressing them? What can we learn from other churches and societies?

power over their bodies, especially in terms of sexual practices and family planning. As family structures change, especially under the impact of economic forces, children increasingly need to fend for themselves. Quality time spent together as a family is increasingly rare. Who will care for the upcoming generation, as well as for the older generation as they become more dependent?

Love and children without marriage?

In a profound shift that has changed the notion of what constitutes a family in many countries, more and more children, for example, in Europe are born out of wedlock into a new social order in which, it seems, few of the old stigmas will apply. The attitude in Europe is somewhat different from that in the US, where the government recently announced it was actively committed to promoting marriage. Welfare policies in many countries are specifically intended to ensure all children enjoy the same financial benefits and treatment, whether their parents are married, living together, separated, divorced or single. “We have little commitment to the institution of marriage, that’s true, but we do have a commitment to parenthood.”¹

In many parts of the world, people are redefining what “family” means. In many places, divorce does not carry the social stigma it once did. Add to this the

exploding number of single mothers, some of whom have never married and have no plans to; couples with smaller families than their parents, or no children at all; the struggle of homosexual couples for rights similar to their heterosexual counterparts—and there are far different portraits of typical families than existed a generation ago.

How is marriage viewed in your society? How are those viewed who have children outside of marriage? How are families and children supported? How is the church in your context responding to these situations? How should it?

These are only a few of the many changing family realities and challenges present in our communion in different parts of the world. Clearly, there are significant differences in what is occurring, and in how we feel, talk and respond to these realities. Careful and sympathetic listening to one another is essential. Our cross-cultural differences over questions of family, gender and sexuality are widespread and significant; there is no one pattern or answer that can be imposed on all. As we discern how we will respond to the need for justice and healing in and through families today, it is crucial that we do so in light of perspectives and understandings that arise out of our Christian faith.

Biblical perspectives

In the face of all these realities, Christians turn to the Bible in search of guidance.

David and Nina do not feel inclined to declare their love in front of some anonymous official in a municipal building, or in a church. So they have never married—not when they moved in together, not when they bought their first house, not when they had their son, now sixteen.

Sometimes one idealized form of family has been assumed to be the “biblical” or “Christian” model. However, there actually have been many different forms of family throughout the history of the Bible and of the Church (see the Bible study on Ruth for one example of this). Yet, throughout history, marriage generally was seen as a legal and social contract between two families for the sake of status, to bear and raise children and to transfer property from one generation to another.

Families, of many different configurations, are central in the Old Testament. This is reflected, for example, in the direct implications that the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1–17) have for family life, both then and now:

- Family relationships are to be honored and nurtured (“honor your father and mother”).
- Destructive abuses of power that harm others are prohibited (“do not kill”).
- Marriage is to be upheld and supported as a sacred union and social institution (“do not commit adultery”).
- Truth-telling is essential in all relationships (“do not bear false witness”).
- Sexual desire that lures one away from spouse or family is condemned (“do not covet”).

In the biblical world, clear gender assumptions were embedded in the cultural notions of family honor and shame. Male

honor involved taking care of and protecting “weaker” family members, and females were expected to preserve the family’s honor by guarding their own sexual purity. Because they were seen as having “dangerous” power to bring shame on the family, women were controlled and guarded, lest they be seduced or raped by another man, which would bring dishonor upon the family—with little attention to the effect on the woman!² Most of the sexual prohibitions in the Bible tend to be associated either with what was considered impure or “dirty” (according to Levitical codes) or greed in seeking the property and persons who “belong” to another householder.³

How, if at all, do these assumptions still operate in your culture? How do you react to them? On what biblical and theological grounds would you challenge some of them today? Why?

In the Early Church, family loyalties were loosened to some extent for the sake of loyalty to the new community rooted in Christ. This is one reason why the Early Church was seen as threatening to the Roman Empire. The church tended to become like a family, in order to care for those who had cut their ties with their biological families. The ethical focus shifted to relationships within this new “family” of the church.

In the Gospels, Jesus redefines “family”: “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:35). Even tax collectors and prostitutes are included in this new family (Mt 21:28–31. Jesus blesses children, “for it is to



such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Mt 19:14). In Jesus Christ, early Christians became “brothers” and “sisters” in a new “household of God” where greater equality among women and men began to emerge, in contrast to the prevalent social pattern of domination. Wives could not be dismissed and divorced as easily as before, and the single life was given new value. Widows, who previously had no status, began to rise above the role of victim and become positive examples of faith, especially in Luke’s Gospel. Honor inherited through one’s blood family was replaced by the honor of doing the will of God.

A highpoint in this new understanding was St. Paul proclaiming that through baptism into Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male or female” (Gal 3:28). Yet, in other Pauline and related writings, especially in the later Pastoral Epistles, understandings of male dominance continued to prevail. The relation of women and men had begun to change dramatically in the first-century church. The exercise by women of this new freedom was shocking to the social system. Conse-

quently, as the church became more established, there were moves away from this new equality, and a reassertion of patriarchal family values.

The Early Church faced the dilemma of how to teach Christian faith and life, especially about matters of family and sexuality, to those from different traditions (such as Jews and Gentiles). This is reflected in the New Testament Epistles and Pastoral Letters. What needed to be emphasized for those from one kind of background was different from what others needed to hear. The church then, as well as today, faced the questions as to which cultural practices regarding family should be affirmed, which ones tolerated and which ones rejected. The sometimes contradictory teachings related to family and sexuality in the Bible reflect this sifting process. It is what we need to continue deliberating, especially in ways that cut across and challenge cultural assumptions, such as those related to polygamy or homosexuality, that are just as controversial in our day.

Paul’s pastoral advice to the church at Corinth contains an extensive section on sexual relationships (1 Cor 5–7). He emphasizes, for example, that the human

Our sexuality is linked to vitality, playfulness, spontaneity, delight, wonder, celebration, procreation and creativity of all kinds, a profound affirmation of life. To deny a person's sexuality is to put a lid on energy and life.⁴

body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19–20), which has important implications for how we live out our sexuality. He offers surprising, sometimes conflicting, advice in relation to situations Christians faced. His realistic pastoral guidance affirms the importance of more mutual relations within marriage, while also affirming those who remained single. What begins to emerge is the ethical principle of judging behavior according to what will result in the least harm to self and neighbor in particular situations, rather than upholding certain absolute rules under all circumstances. Today, this principle has become increasingly central in Lutheran perspectives on family and sexuality.

Central theological themes in Scripture are foundational, but questions need to be raised about ethical teachings that are bound to certain cultural understandings and assumptions, and how they may or may not apply in situations today. The community of faith is called to talk and discern together how we should live our lives as finite moral agents, who sin and are forgiven and ultimately are responsible to God.

What are the central ethical teachings that should prevail amid changing cultural realities?

Sexuality

In the Hebrew Scriptures, sexual activity is viewed quite positively. In the beginning of Genesis we read that God created humankind male and female (Gen 1:27) and “indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). In the Bible, the often overlooked Song of Songs celebrates the joys of erotic, sexual pleasure. Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of

expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure. At the same time, marred by sin, it can lead to deep pain, frustration and harm.

Throughout much of church history, sexual activity was seen as a concession to human weakness, and a life of celibacy was valued above marriage. Martin Luther was among those who helped to liberate sexuality from the prison of a dualism that regarded “spirit” as good and “flesh” (and thus sexuality) as ugly, bad and sinful. The Reformers made a special effort to restore sexuality as a pleasurable aspect of God's good creation, rather than viewing it only in relation to sin. Luther declared “that God gave us and implanted into our bodies genitals, blood vessels, fluids, and everything else necessary” for sexual partnership. Preventing sexual activity is “preventing nature from being nature.”⁵ Thus Luther abandoned celibacy, married, had children and enjoyed family life.

Sexuality is deeply infused with cultural meanings that vary over time and place. What is considered “natural” (or “common sense,” “the way things are”) in some cultures may feel quite unnatural or even revolting in others. What is “natural” is embedded with cultural assumptions that vary over time and place. This is why caution must be exercised in how categories such as “natural” or “orders of creation” are used with regard to sexuality, especially when they are used as categories of power that exclude those who do not fit a prescribed order of what is considered natural. What is regarded as different from a

How is sexuality viewed in your context? How, if at all, is it talked about in your church? How should it be?

given norm, especially what disturbs the predictable order of things, is considered “unnatural” and on that basis, often judged to be immoral. For example, the subordination of women or the separation of races through slavery or apartheid has, in the past, been considered natural, based on the orders of creation.

Discuss some examples of what is considered natural in some contexts but unnatural in others. As you do so, pay careful attention to the different cultural perceptions and reactions that are involved. What are some common convictions that move beyond these differences?

From the perspective of the new life in Christ, we are able to move beyond these categories and focus instead on what will best express love and compassion for “the neighbor” in whatever cultural context we find ourselves. Power used in ways that exclude or abuse others is wrong in any context. What challenges does this raise in your context?

Ethical perspectives to consider today

By focusing on the network of relationships in which human beings find themselves, the focus on justice and healing in families has much to contribute to how we pursue Christian ethics. Theological

themes in Scripture can guide our decision making, but they do not by themselves tell us what to do in the particular situations we face. Here decisions need to be made by people as finite moral agents responsible to God. As Christians, we should honor the teachings contained in the Holy Scriptures while being open to challenges based on social existence, with norms of love, inclusiveness and mutual acceptance of each other. In a spirit of joy and gladness, we are called to seek justice and healing in and through all kinds of families.

Consider how the following ethical perspectives could be helpful in addressing the challenges facing families and sexuality in your context:

- God intends human beings to find personal meaning and healing through family relationships. Relationships should be evaluated according to whether they are mutually just, loving and promote personal and social flourishing. In the case of intimate sexual activity, what is ethically significant is the qualitative nature of the relationship within which this occurs, and whether this activity builds up and enhances, or harms and destroys the life of the other (the sexual partner, the family, the community).
- Marriage is a union between two people that embodies God’s loving purpose to nurture, create and enrich life, through a lifelong relationship of mutual love, fidelity

This relational understanding is similar to the African concept of *ubuntu*. Being human is always in relation to other persons, as well as animals, plants and the earth. To describe a person as “having *ubuntu*” means that she or he is a caring person who is living as a responsible citizen, caring for others and worshipping God. Values such as justice, respect, honesty and the equality of all peoples are highlighted. Such a person remains a person, as long as she or he is embedded in the solidarity of the community, regardless of her or his condition, situation or deeds. If this social body is threatened, then the whole existence of a people, or the survival of the human race is endangered.

Share some of the cultural/community practices, pastoral care approaches and congregational programs that are helpful for healing families in your context.

and joy. The binding legal contract of marriage reinforces its “staying power” when it is threatened by sin. At the same time, compassion and healing are needed in those situations where a marriage may need to be ended.

- Through conceiving, bearing, adopting and rearing children, a family participates in God’s ongoing creation. Both parents should be prepared to welcome, take care of and provide for a child. When that is not the case, the responsible use of safe, effective contraceptive methods are expected of both sexual partners. Special attention must be paid to the unequal power in sexual relations, and the lack of access that women often have to contraception and protection against sexually-transmitted diseases.
- As believers whose lives have been marked by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should respond to the hope that is in us by living out a faith active in love that seeks justice. The core issue is that justice be done in any type of family. Furthermore, we must challenge the unjust, dominating use of power over others, including male dominance over females in family and sexual relations, especially when this results in various forms of abuse.⁶

What policies are needed for the sake of greater justice for families in your society? For what kinds of policies should the Lutheran communion be advocating?

- A Lutheran ethic of family and sexuality seeks to be practical and realistic, recognizing that what we do in this world will never be free of sin. We are called to use our God-given sense and judgement to discern what will best approximate who we are as part of the household of God, and how the life of the neighbor can best be protected and enhanced. In living this out, we must continually rely on God’s grace and forgiveness.

Healing of and justice for families

Given all the stress and wounds afflicting families, there are enormous needs for healing, many of which are specific to a given context. How families are healed in different cultures and settings will vary significantly.

For justice in families—of whatever kind—it would be well to remember the words of prophet Micah: “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). The joy of being a family of God makes us “a Christ” to others, enabling us to engage joyfully in ministries of healing and justice in the world. This includes faith (walking with God) and good works (doing justice and loving kindness). Being justified by faith through grace leads us to pursuing love and justice for the neighbor.

Given the highly charged differences there are about families and sexuality in our world today, we can be sure that as we discuss these matters, “our shoes will get muddy.” But at the same time, we pray for the grace to avoid unfairly judging those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided.

Notes

¹ Kari Moxnes of the University at Trondheim, quoted in “To more Europeans, love doesn’t mean marriage,” *International Herald Tribune*, 25 March, 2002, p. 15.

² Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and Household Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 38–42.

³ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

⁴ Niloufer Harben, “Dancing Towards the Light: Some Perspectives on Sexuality and Spirituality,” in *In God’s Image: Journal of Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, vol. 20:3 (2001), p. 14.

⁵ Eric W. Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 297.

⁶ For more on this, see *Churches Say “No” to Violence Against Women* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002).



H. Overcoming Violence



Violence—in families, societies and between communities—continues to inflict deep wounds, especially on women, children and youth. Conflict within and between countries devastates land and peoples. How is the God we know in Jesus Christ healing violence in our world today? How do we respond theologically to horrendous acts of violence? How can memories be healed and cycles of violence overcome? How can member churches advocate with others, particularly through the “Decade to Overcome Violence,” for the sake of justice, peace and reconciliation?

A violent world

The past century is said to have been the most violent in history—with wars and conflicts having killed an estimated 200 million people. With the end of the ideological confrontations of the Cold War, dormant antagonisms between and within states, ethnic and religious groups have re-emerged, bringing a new unpredictability to the political landscape. In many areas, it seems that revived nationalism based on ethnic, religious and cultural exclusivity, rather than liberal democracy, is filling the vacuum left behind after the fall of Communist regimes.¹ Two thirds of violent conflicts in today's world are within a country. The massive suffering resulting from these conflicts continues to be borne disproportionately by those who already have been victimized and marginalized—socially, psychologically, economically and politically.

War redresses assaults on life by further destroying life; the boundary between innocent and guilty is transgressed; those least powerful socially and politically suffer the most. This is self-defeating, creating a spiral of violence that ends when one side suffers so much death, suffering and loss that it can only capitulate to the more powerful.²

Which conflicts have most deeply affected you and your church? How? What other forms of violence especially alarm you?

In addition to armed conflicts between nations and armed groups, “violence” brings to mind:

- Random and targeted killings in our streets, schools and other public places.
- Violence that states inflict on their own citizens, including through

such legal means as the death penalty.

- Violence in the name of religion against religious minorities.
- How prisons have become places that breed ever more violent criminals.
- Increasing incidents of violence against immigrants in many countries.
- The prevalence of guns and other weapons in many of our societies, and the vast arms trade between countries.
- How many children have access to guns, and the use of child soldiers.
- The alarming increase of violence against women and children, making “home” for many of them even more dangerous than the streets.
- The built-up rage and desperation that fuels acts of terrorism.
- The extensive violence in sports, video games and other “entertainment” media, that satisfies and feeds aggressive drives.
- The public's increasing numbness and helplessness in the face of violence, making people more susceptible to radical measures that threaten both freedom and justice in society.

In situations of violence, human beings are the victims. Wars, insurrections, or battles for secession or independence involve whole communities, and result not only in the death and injury of civilians, but in the loss of income, homes and social structures. Massive numbers of

A considerable amount of LWF World Service work seeks to bring healing and hope to those displaced and traumatized by such conflicts. Through the Office of International Affairs and Human Rights, the General Secretary regularly speaks to those responsible in situations of conflict around the world. Violence against women is addressed by the Women's Desk in DMD. For more on these activities, see the Six Year Report.

people are displaced, and the majority of victims tend to be women and children.

Forms and causes of violence

The most obvious form of violence is the intentional use of force in order to inflict harm on persons, not only by threatening or taking their lives, but also by excluding, subjugating and dehumanizing them. Terrorism, which stirs up widespread and intense fear and anxiety, involves acts of gross violence by those seeking to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands. It can also be seen as a response to unjust political and economic realities.

Less obvious, but often even more pervasively harmful, are structural forms of violence, which oppress through unjust social systems, and lead to violations of human dignity, suffering and death. These forms of violence—such as when millions of men and women are left without food or a livelihood, dehumanized and left to die—breed self-perpetuating cycles of violence that can be more harmful, massive and insidious than isolated acts of violence. Structural violence is inflicted through economic policies, such as structural adjustment programs, in which basic human needs are ignored for the sake of economic growth, as well as through systemic policies that affect or neglect whole populations. Physical acts of violence often are a desperate response to structural violence.

The term “institutional violence” has been used to describe this structural vio-

lence. It is the “violence of the status quo,” **which perpetuates** violence against a large number of those within a society.³ Sometimes this is referred to as “covert” in distinction from “overt” violence. However, this hardly feels covert to those who are its direct victims.

State-sponsored violence is often inflicted on a whole population that may agonizingly observe what is occurring, but feel powerless to change situations in which the government and institutions seem to conspire against them. State terrorism is a symptom of violent political structures. International policies and institutions may also play an indirect role in perpetuating such violence because of what they require from local governments.

Other Village Group chapters are giving more attention to some of the wider causes of violence in our world today, such as

- the lack of a sense of worth or purpose (chapter A),
- the barriers that exclude persons because of their identity or circumstances (chapter E),
- stress and injustice within families (chapter G),
- inter-religious tensions (chapter D),
- forces of economic globalization (chapter I), and
- human domination over and violation of creation (chapter J)

The causes of violence are rooted in political, economic and social systems, es-

pecially those that set people over and against one another and the rest of creation. The failure to provide educational opportunities, or the manipulation of sources of information, can do violence to those affected. Repressing the freedom of expression or action is a form of political and psychological violence. The condescension and subtle forms of discrimination with which the older generation treats those who are younger (or *vice versa*), or men treat women, or one “race” or religious group treats another, are other expressions of this kind of violence. We live in societies in which the drive for personal security, self-esteem or power, and the failure to share responsibility and decision making often inflict violence on others. Violence, therefore, is a condition that entraps us all, although some are far more personally impacted by it.

invariably becomes a source of inter-religious violence.⁴

Under the banner of “returning to the fundamentals of faith” and also in efforts to assert their own religious and ethnic identity, religious communities sometimes have encouraged intolerance, dogmatism, exclusion and extremism. When one religious group asserts a sense of superiority over another, aggression against them may be tolerated, justified and even incited. A dramatic recent case in point was the outbreak of violence between Muslims and Hindus in Godhra in the Indian state of Gujarat, resulting in the death of hundreds. Religious fundamentalism encourages triumphalistic exclusivism, and lays the foundation for communal disharmony and sometimes outbursts of violence. Religious leaders have sometimes directed adherents to support one political power against another. This arouses and feeds on emotional and religious sentiments among the people, making it very easy for political as well as religious forces to manipulate them for their own self-serving interests.

These religious dynamics are also often entwined with ethnic identities. Such identities and their aspirations could not be rooted out either by totalitarian socialism or by hegemonic statism. Even if states do not suppress minority or aboriginal identity groups through the use of violence, they tend to subordinate them through policies of assimilation, which attempt to integrate them within a single national framework or common project. In the process, these groups are often subjected to structural violence in the form of discrimination.

Violence against women

Women shoulder the heavy burden of sustaining embattled societies, while at-

Share how this may be manifested in your part of the world. What most alarms you about religiously based violence? What should we as churches be saying or doing about it? What risks or difficulties are involved?

Religiously based violence

Violence fueled by religion is especially alarming today. This is not a new phenomenon. For example, when the Joint Declaration on Justification was signed in 1999, it was noted that in Europe this could be viewed as a “peace treaty” because of the many wars between “Lutheran” and “Catholic” lands that have been fought over the last 500 years. Violence can become particularly vicious and entrenched when connected with different religious groups, each of which has ultimate religious commitments.

When religion is connected with citizenship (the state), nationality or ethnicity it

tending to traumas, miseries and violence during conflicts. Women are disproportionately represented among refugees or internally displaced persons. Rape of women in situations of war or civil insurgencies seems endemic. Official failure to condemn or punish rape gives it an overt political sanction, implying that rape and other forms of torture and ill treatment are acceptable tools of military strategy.

Most women experience war not as combatants, but as civilians caught in the crossfire. In wars today, the proportion of civilians killed or disabled, compared to combatants, is climbing sharply. In their traditional roles as homemakers, mothers and caregivers, women suffer greatly, losing their husbands and sons as well as their means of subsistence. Long-term military occupation further exposes women to continual threats of sexual violence. Damage done to the environment also affects their bodies and those of the children they bear.

Cultural and religious traditions that keep women passive in the face of such suffering contribute to violence and help justify the perpetuation of violence against women in their homes, on streets and in workplaces throughout the world. The abuse is psychological as well as physical. The resulting shame and humiliation of both the abused and the abusers often keep the violent patterns from being exposed or addressed.

Our calling as people of faith is to challenge whenever religion is used to justify violence against women (or any other group), and to raise up the liberating potential within our faith. We must declare violence against women a sin that damages the image of God in the victim as well as in the perpetrator. If violence against women and children is to stop, men and women must work together to counter it. Women need to become empowered actors and not victims. Similarly, models of masculinity need to be

embraced that do not include or depend on exercising dominance over women.

What kinds of violence against women are especially prevalent in your society? How is your church addressing these? What other groups in your society become targets of violence?

Biblical and theological perspectives

The land of Israel/Palestine has been the scene of repeated conflicts throughout biblical times to our own day. Reflecting that context, stories of violence and warfare are found throughout Scripture, including some examples of brutal violence against women. Violence is an all-too-common theme in Scripture, including in many depictions of God that either are violent or seem to justify the use of violence. God is frequently depicted in Hebrew Scripture as a warrior, cooperating with and justifying people's aggression against their enemies, and the destruction of cities, lands and peoples. Yet, since Cain killed Abel (Gen 4), and the soil cried out in horror, those shaped by the biblical story have known that revenge only continues the vicious cycle of violence.

This is not the only or most important emphasis in Scripture. God is also depicted as a God of peace, or *shalom*. *Shalom* is more than the absence of war; it is a promise of the fullness of well-being. "A society so ordered will have *shalom*: rest, security, health, wholeness, well-being, prosperity."⁵ *Shalom* includes orderly fruitfulness of the land, policies of equitable justice and practices of generous caring. In other words, *shalom* is the opposite of those conditions that embody and lead to violence. When *shalom* is repudiated, the world falls into violence and chaos.



The Hebrew prophets protested when injustices and rulers eroded God's *shalom*: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). According to the prophets, God opposes the atrocities of war, or trusting in weapons for security. Weapons of violence are to be converted into instruments of peace (Mic 4:1–4), "and no one shall make them afraid." *Shalom* extended beyond the borders of Israel, to include the worst of her enemies.

Jesus too lived in a situation of institutionalized violence under the occupation of a foreign power. This was reflected in many of his parables and sayings. He often found himself in conflict with the religious leaders, and sometimes was moved to anger. The Gospels record his having used militant imagery: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Yet, he also told his disciples to put away their swords, rather than striking out to defend him at the time of his betrayal. He wept over Jerusalem; "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (Lk 19:42).

Jesus chose to identify with the prophetic rather than the warrior strain in Hebrew Scripture. In healing stories Jesus often was referred to as a prophet. The peace (*shalom*) that he extended to those he healed brought health and wholeness. On the basis of this same *shalom*, he critiqued those who took advantage of the poor.

The war that is open to Jesus' followers is not war against other nations, but war against hypocrisy and greed and cruelty and injustice, war against all the demonic systems and powers that cripple and cramp and pervert the humanity of human beings.⁶

In the face of hostility and persecution, Jesus tended to withdraw from confrontation with those who opposed him. He followed a course of nonviolent resistance and counseled his followers to do likewise. He taught forgiveness rather than revenge, and rebuked those who proposed revenge against those who rejected him (Lk 9:52–56). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called for persistent and imaginative efforts to decrease and to overcome violence. Do

We hope for the future of the one whose life began with the slaughter of the innocents, the one who experienced the terrorism of the state on the cross, the one who died for a world that seems ruled by violence and hatred, the one who descended into hell and therefore can stand with all who suffer for any kind of terrorism. We see in the resurrection of the crucified one the beginning of the defeat of evil and terror and thus the objective ground for staying in hope for this world.⁸

not react violently against the one who is evil, or you will become a reflection of them (Mt 5:39). Most radical of all, he calls his followers to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6:27).

This way of living led to a violent death on the cross. “God’s son on the cross is perhaps the greatest challenge the church can bring to a world shaken by violence.”⁷ Rather than a myth of redemptive violence, which only serves to perpetuate violence, our faith is in a God who through forgiveness and reconciliation breaks the cycle of violence.

Churches committed to overcome violence

From this perspective, the central commitment of the Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence is not naïve. It is rooted in the core of the faith the church confesses, in a crucified and risen Christ, who overcame violence through nonviolent resistance to those conditions that lead to and are themselves violent.

The church is called to nonviolence not to preserve its purity but to express its fidelity. Nonviolence is not a law but a gift.... The gospel is not concerned in the least with our anxiety to *be* right; it wants to *see right done*.... In the final analysis, nonviolence is not a matter of legalism but of discipleship. It is the way God has chosen to overthrow evil in the world.⁹

Overcoming violence is not simply a missionary task underpinned by selected

biblical passages.¹⁰ What is challenging is to end self-generating cycles of violence of whatever kind, whether in the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, Asia, in the streets of our communities, or the bedrooms of our homes. In any situation where one group holds the power, and others are left dependent, injustices fester and are often reinforced and perpetuated by violence.

At the root of violence is the issue of power. In a relation involving two parties, one exerts aggressive power over the other. How can this power be countered? The immediate tendency is to react by striking back, using an act of violence in an attempt to counter the violence. As is only too apparent, this often leads to a counterattack, or the onset of an escalating cycle of violence. Striking back or struggling against violence often results in greater violence or oppression on the part of the stronger party.

Out of anger the perpetrator of violence expects the powerful to lash out in counterviolence, a greater degree of violence, against the powerless.¹¹

How do you see cycles of violence being perpetuated?
Being stopped?

Therefore, churches must work with others to:

- Speak out against both overt and covert violence, and especially its root causes in particular situations. Because it may be risky for a church directly involved to do so,

it is important that we do so on behalf of one another, in solidarity as a communion. This occurs through both prayer and advocacy.

- Overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence as a way of dealing with conflicts, for example, through

- training in nonviolent resistance,
- conflict mediation,
- challenging images, including in Scripture and the media, that condition us to react violently,

- examining the stories we pass on about those who are different (“enemies”),
- education for the peaceful resolution of differences,
- community building across divisions,
- forming peacemaking groups at the grass roots, and
- opening up spaces where the truth can be spoken without fear of reprisal.

- Advocate for policies that will help to overcome violence:

- Hold accountable those who commit acts of violence against women, children and other vulnerable groups.
- Advance democracy, human rights and religious liberty.

- Foster just and sustainable economic development.

- Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.

- Strengthen the United Nations and other international organizations.

- Reduce offensive weapons trade.

Continue exploring ethical questions related to the use of violence

Included in our Lutheran Confessions is Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession, which focuses on the so-called “just war” criteria for bringing moral restraint into situations in which warfare is being considered or already underway.¹² The rigorous application of these criteria would rule out most situations as failing to meet conditions that would justify warfare. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Christians have questioned the appropriateness of the just war tradition. Just war criteria are limited in helpfulness insofar as violence usually erupts in the midst of long-standing hostilities that have already involved considerable violence on both sides.

Among the critical observations raised in a 1993 LWF study of this just war tradition,¹³ were that:

- In most cases the just **cause** can no longer be identified because the reasons for a war lie above all in social and economic injustices, historically developed enemy images and in notions of threat.
- The proportionality of **means** is no longer a given, due to the development of military technology,

What else should the churches be doing to overcome violence?

global strategies and the extension of war to include the civilian population.

- The right **intention** is no longer possible under the conditions of modern technology, because what should be protected will be destroyed.

In the light of developments in military technology and strategy, “it is fundamentally questioned whether war may still be conducted as the continuation of politics by other means.”¹⁴

While Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession concerned the use of force between nations, the question that has arisen more recently is whether the international community can responsibly engage in specific, limited military action in situations of anarchy and genocide. This question was considered in a paper received by the LWF Council in 2000.¹⁵ In some extreme situations, power is blatantly misused leading to massive violations of human rights and the devastating destruction of communities. Such violations are either generated by the ruling authorities or such that these authorities lack the capacity to counter. It is to such overt, systemic manifestations of sin—which become evil—that our focus is drawn when the question of armed intervention to defend human rights is considered.

The ethical dilemma of armed intervention is that it is a violent means of seeking to redress such violations. Some are opposed in principle to any use of violence for the purpose of ending or lessening violence; violence begets more violence. Others contend that decisive actions are needed to stop what is likely to be even greater violence.

Threats of force and the use of military action can protect life and secure peace only in the short term. In the long run, peace can only be secured when

fundamental human rights are respected and just conditions established. Therefore, it is the task and primary responsibility of all parties to seek to solve conflicts through negotiation and by peaceful means. Even so, in this sinful world the threat of the use of military action may seem unavoidable, in order to protect human life, to limit killing and to prevent even greater suffering.

The tension between the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of a sovereign state versus the responsibility of the international community to ensure respect for human rights reveals that, first of all, the concept of sovereignty is in transition; this transition is linked to international accountability. Secondly, international law or agreed upon norms have not yet been developed to reflect these changes. In such a situation, the ethical challenge is to balance the legal principle of state sovereignty with the ethical imperative of protecting human life.

Armed intervention for humanitarian purposes can only be contemplated when all attempts at preventative diplomacy have failed. These preventative initiatives must always form the context of discussions within which any decision regarding armed intervention for humanitarian purposes is considered or undertaken. Such intervention must be considered strictly as a last resort for the protection of human life when it is threatened by gross and egregious violations of human rights, and only under clearly defined and restricted criteria.

Should the LWF have a clear position on this dilemma? If so, what factors and ethical principles should guide our thinking and action?

Furthermore, there are important theological and ethical questions to be pursued regarding the relationship between vulnerability and security,¹⁶ insofar as this relates to the overcoming of

violence. Recognizing vulnerability as something fundamentally human leads to the recognition that the security of others is our joint, cooperative responsibility. This is underlined because enmity and conflict arise especially when people feel vulnerable. Recognition of our vulnerability and that of others is a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of security. Security in our day, when it can no longer be linked primarily to state sovereignty, must be linked directly to vulnerable persons and their need for

protection against whatever threatens their survival and freedom. This involves social, economic, environmental and not primarily military aspects of security. Human rights for all becomes a crucial security issue.

We must not remove vulnerability, but defend it, so that human beings can continue to be vulnerable, and therefore human. Theologically grounded perspectives such as these can be an important contribution of churches to the global challenge of overcoming violence.

What is the strategic role of human rights in the work to overcome violence? What other theological/ethical challenges to overcoming violence should we as a communion of churches be addressing? How will you and your church be participating in the Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence?

Notes

¹ Jeanne Vickers, *Women and War* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993), p. 1.

² Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Danger of Violence and the Call to Peace," in Jon L. Berquist, *Strike Terror No More: Theology, Ethics, and the New War* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), pp. 222–223.

³ Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 34–35.

⁴ T. K. Oommen, "Religion as Source of Violence," in *Ecumenical Review* 53:2 (April 2001), p. 175.

⁵ Albert Curry Winn, *Ain't Gonna Study War No More: Biblical Ambiguity and the Abolition of War* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁷ Margot Kässman, *Overcoming Violence* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), p. 40.

⁸ M. Douglas Meeks, "What Can We Hope for Now?," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 254.

⁹ Walter Wink, "We Must Find a Better Way," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 335.

¹⁰ Fernando Enns, "Breaking the Cycle of Violence," in *Ecumenical Review* 53:2 (April 2001), p. 181.

¹¹ Fumitaka Matsuoka, "For This the Earth Shall Mourn," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 53.

¹² Principles for deciding whether a war is just include right intention, justifiable cause, legitimate authority, last resort, declaration of war aims, proportionality and reasonable chance of success. Principles for conducting war include noncombatant immunity and proportionality.

¹³ Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *War, Confession and Conciliarity: What does "just war" in the Augsburg Confession mean today?*, Vorlagen, Neue Folge, Heft 18 (Hanover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1993).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵ Agenda for the Meeting of the LWF Council, 2000, Exhibit 17.3, "Armed Intervention to Defend Human Rights: A Discussion Paper" from which the sentences that follow are excerpted.

¹⁶ The following insights are excerpted from *Vulnerability and Security*, prepared by the Commission on International Affairs of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations (2000).



I. Transforming Economic Globalization



The powers of economic globalization reign over our world today as a theological challenge. Although some results are positive, injustices also increase, communities are fragmented and the earth is further exploited. How can we as a Lutheran communion of churches hold these powers more accountable to the vulnerable, especially through decisions and actions that can be taken? What diverse strategies are needed? Through the LWF study process, what commitments and steps will we take together, with other ecumenical and civil society partners? How are individual members, congregations and member churches involved?

The biblical call to transform what harms the neighbor

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22: 37–40).

According to Luther, there are two principles of Christian faith. The first is that Christ has given himself “that we may be saved.” The second is to “love ... as he gives himself for us ... so we too are to give ourselves with might and main for our neighbor.”¹ Luther insists on the inseparability of the two: they are “inscribed together as on a tablet which is always before our eyes and which we use daily.”² As beloved creatures of God, and as Christ’s body, we are to embody Christ’s love by loving God, self and neighbor far and near. Lutherans have often referred to this as faith active in love. This love is lived out in the world by seeking justice through social structures, policies and practices. Faith motivates us to seek change in what harms the neighbor. However, it is difficult to discern how to live out this “faith active in love” in the morally convoluted realities of economic life, which today are pervasively shaped by complex and powerful globalizing forces.

Stories of life in the globalizing economy

In many parts of the world, the availability of clean water is a matter of life and death. Infants and young children are especially vulnerable when clean water supplies are priced out of reach. In 1999, in the wake of pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Bolivia passed a law privatizing all water supplies in the city of

Cochabamba. A subsidiary of a US-based company bought the water supply, seeking 16 percent annual return on investments. Shortly thereafter the price of water increased, by as much as 300 percent for some of the poorest people. For many, clean water, a necessity for life, was no longer possible.

Who suffers from the decision to privatize water? What influenced this decision? Who is responsible for protecting the basic good for all? How should we as a communion of churches be responding? Are there parallel experiences of “privatization” where you live?

A woman in the US has been employed for years in the manufacturing plant of a corporation operating globally. Her income has enabled her to support her family. Inexpensive goods produced in many less affluent parts of the world have benefited her family’s budget. Suddenly the plant closes in order to relocate on the northern Mexican border where labor costs are much cheaper and environmental regulations more lax. The woman and her family are devastated when she loses her job. A child falls ill and requires expensive treatment that they cannot afford because they no longer have health insurance. In addition, they will soon lose their home.

In this case, what does economic globalization mean for the workers now employed in Mexico? What might they say to the woman in the US? What are the different working conditions in these two countries? Who is responsible? What is the role of international standards in protecting workers? How should we as churches be responding to situations like this?

Gender is an important lens for seeing the effects of economic globalization. In globalized production processes, unskilled jobs in mass production parts typically go to women and children, who work for long hours in “sweatshop” conditions with few labor standards or regulations. Although their pay might seem exploitative according to global corporate standards, it at least provides support for families in communities where income-generating activity is otherwise scarce. Men, unable to find jobs in their local communities, often migrate to urban areas to seek employment, leaving behind women who end up having to hold together entire households on their own. When international financial institutions require countries to cut expenditures for health care, education and food programs, this places further burdens on care providers who usually are women. In some situations, young women migrate to other countries with promises of employment, but are deceived and either are forced to, or in desperation, become prostitutes. Globalizing forces thus contribute significantly to an increase in gender tensions and inequities.

What are some of the differing effects of globalization on men and women in your context?

Investors around the globe are pleased by the returns gained from investments in large transnational seed companies which are increasingly controlling markets worldwide. Many families have been able to achieve more comfortable lives because of these investments. At the same time, a small subsistence farmer in India is unable to work the land that his people have worked for generations, because he no longer can replant the seeds from his harvest. Under a World Trade Organization ruling, the seed strain has been

What agricultural and biotechnology issues are raised by this example? How could a global communion of churches address them? How do you experience the effects of economic globalization on agriculture in your context?

patented by a large transnational company, and may not be used without paying a sizeable royalty. In another part of the world, a pastor cries out: “The freedom of large seed companies to maximize profit has destroyed the family farmers in this region. The result is a silent death for the farmers.”

Patenting of indigenous knowledge of plant varieties, together with “cheap food” policies in countries such as the US, encourage large-scale agricultural production. The surplus then floods markets in poor countries, undermining local farmers and their ability to cover production costs. Local producers are then encouraged to grow products for exports. This, in turn, exacerbates food insecurity in countries where hunger is already rampant.

What is economic globalization?

In a positive sense, globalization refers to the increasing interdependence of people and organizations around the world. Such interdependence is something the church has long affirmed and encouraged. In contrast, economic globalization is a form of economic activity that places priority on the free movement of investment capital, profit maximization and growth, thus abdicating all decisions to market forces. This tends to undermine investment in education and health, to increase inequality and to reduce labor’s share in income.

This form of economic globalization has become a burning moral issue for



many—for ecumenical and humanitarian organizations, for groups in civil society and for many within the Lutheran communion. Since economic globalization is assumed to be “inevitable,” it becomes a deeply theological issue: dictates of economic globalization are promulgated as if they were the “gospel truth,” universally applicable to all people throughout the world. Structural adjustment plans (now “poverty reduction programs”) are imposed on developing countries to manage their debt, but often at severe social costs. The rules that are included in trade agreements do not consider the social consequences on people, communities and the environment.

Prominent features of economic globalization today include:³

- **Mobility across borders:** There has been an escalating movement of goods, services and capital (trade and investment) across international borders.
- **Deregulation:** Regulations are dropped or lessened in order to enable this movement to occur more freely. Multilateral trade and investment agreements and agencies limit governments’ legal powers to regulate the operations of global corporations and finance institutions that affect their land, resources and people.
- **Corporate power:** A growing portion of the world’s large economies are unaccountable to the public as a whole: 51 of the world’s 100 largest economies are corporations (based on gross sales compared to the GDP of a country).⁴
- **Privatization:** Many public goods and services are being privatized, such as water, electricity, health care and education.

- **Commodification of life:** A monetary value is being placed on more and more areas of life, including life forms (i.e., human genetic material or traditional seed strains) and life experiences (i.e., spiritual growth, happiness, cultural practices), which then can be marketed worldwide.⁵
- **Homogenization:** Western consumer-oriented ways of life are marketed around the world to such an extent that local products and cultural practices eventually disappear.
- **Speculative investment:** Buying and selling money instruments for the purpose of high, short-term gain outpace trade in actual goods and services, and long-term investment in production-oriented economic activity. Thus, the finance and corporate sectors seek to “free” investment from regulations and other political constraints which might diminish profit. Similarly, as noted above, trade is being “freed” by deregulation. Those moves, together with the revolution in communications and information technology, enable huge amounts of money instantly to be bought and sold across national borders by investors without regard to the social and environmental impact of these investments.

Economic globalization is experienced as a paradoxical reality. Its multiple dynamics have quite diverse consequences for different people and lands. For some in our world, economic globalization brings economic growth and, with it, enormous economic benefits. Economic growth has lifted many out of poverty and has created an abundance of goods and services and, for some, even soaring standards of living. On the other hand, a large chorus of

voices points to the threats that globalization poses to the web of life on earth. That chorus includes prominent scientists, economists, theologians, ecumenical organizations and hundreds of other labor, environmental, women’s and human rights’ groups throughout the world. The overall message of these voices is that, as a whole, the prevailing model of economic globalization widens the gap between the wealthy and the rest of humanity, and assaults the earth’s life-support systems. Democracy, human rights, cultural integrity and diversity and the very lives of especially those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged tend to be sacrificed. Economic globalization that is shaped by TNCs and financial institutions so as to maximize profit or gain, has adverse consequences for the earth and the majority of its inhabitants.

Economic globalization is undergirded by the following theory:

Deregulation of foreign trade and investment contributes to growth which, in the long run, benefits everyone. Regulations on trade and investment detract from growth, and hence from economic well-being. More specifically, deregulation increases foreign trade and investment. Increased foreign trade and investment generate economic growth directly, and as well as indirectly by increasing competition, which increases efficiency. Increased efficiency lowers consumer prices and generates growth. Economic growth increases prosperity, employment and living standards for most people. The economic problems of “developing nations” are due to restrictions of market forces. Economic and other social problems (except for natural disasters and war) are best solved by means of the market, rather than by political processes.⁶

What have been some of the symptoms or expressions of economic globalization in your community or country?

This theory assumes the equality of all participants, with balanced power and opportunities, but this is far from the reality in most situations.

From a Christian faith perspective

By our silence or reluctance to challenge these assumptions and engage these realities of economic globalization, we risk compromising the very faith we confess. This form of globalization tends to weaken those very bonds that theologically are constitutive of who we are in relation to others. Our faith reminds us that:

- Created in God's image (Gen 1:27), we exist in relation to others. The dignity and value of each person emerge in community. People are in relationship with one another, not primarily to compete for economic gain, but for the sake of loving, sharing and enjoying what each contributes to the whole community. Private interests and public interests are deeply interconnected.
- The God-given purpose of the economy (*oikonomia*) is that it should serve the well-being of the whole household of God (*oikos*). This must not be sacrificed for the sake of economic profit and growth.
- Rather than human needs and desires being reduced to wants, which consumerism feeds, priority should be given to what is good for the whole global community, especially those who are the poorest.
- Rather than controlled by random movements of faceless economic transactions, through our baptismal vocation we are empowered to act in relation to what matters in our lives and world and in light of a vision of God's inclusive justice for all.

Martin Luther on economic life

While Luther's sixteenth-century views do not translate directly into our current context, his central concern for how economic practices impact communities continues to be key today. For him, economic practices that undermine the well-being of the neighbor (especially those most vulnerable) were to be rejected and replaced with alternatives. On these grounds, Luther vehemently denounced aspects of the emerging sixteenth-century capitalist economy that he considered harmful to people who were economically vulnerable. For example, in his treatise, "On Trade and Usury,"⁷ he sets forth norms for economic life, such as:

- Because selling is an act toward neighbor, its goal should not be profit but, rather, "an adequate living," in order to serve the needs of others.
- Economic activity should be restrained politically. Selling ought not be an act that is entirely within your own power and discretion, without law or limit. Civil authorities ought to establish rules and regulations, including ceilings on prices. In buying and selling, adhere to firm rules, one of which is: no selling at a price as high as the market will bear.⁸

What other perspectives from the Christian faith should shape how we respond to economic realities today?

In addition, Luther reminds pastors that they are obligated to unmask hidden injus-

tices of economic practices that exploit the vulnerable. He goes as far as to admonish clergy to preach against economic practices that are unjust toward the poor, and to withhold the sacrament from a user unless he repents, for he is “damned like a thief, robber and murderer.”⁹

On this basis, Luther condemned practices such as charging a higher price for goods sold on credit, raising prices when the supply is low, buying out the entire supply of a commodity and then raising the price, and buying at a low price from those who need money so badly that they sell low. He denounced the trading companies’ monopolistic practices. He declared them to be

a bottomless pit of avarice and wrong-doing They control all commodities ... raise or lower prices at their pleasure. They oppress and ruin all the small businessmen... . Through their practices all the world must be sucked dry and all the money sink and swim in their gullets.⁹³

The point here is not to advocate a direct and uncritical application of Luther’s economic analysis or norms to the contemporary situation. Given Luther’s inflammatory denunciations of Jews, peasants and Anabaptists, his social analyses or ethical guidance should not be uncritically adopted as normative for today. Nor is the point to imply that Luther was an early anti-capitalist. His condemnation of emerging capitalism and his alternative economic norms and practices were not based on a modern notion of social change, but on a conservative defense of feudal social arrangements and prohibitions on charging in-

terest. What does have enduring value was his theological conviction that economic life—in fact, all of life—must be consistent with the proclamation and hearing of the gospel and with neighborly love.

Furthermore, in his context, Luther’s economic norms had “subversive” implications. They gave priority to the well-being of all, in contrast to economic practices that resulted in gains for only a few. These norms were based on and drew their spiritual and moral power from the theological foundation of sacramental communion:

The sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that [s]he is made one with all others. For just as the bread is made out of many grains ground and mixed together, and out of the bodies of many grains there comes the body of the bread....and through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common.... In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love.¹¹

By its very nature, economic activity is to be carried out in relationship to the neighbor, and thus guided by the following principle: Christians, having received God’s love through grace alone, respond by embodying God’s love for others, thus seeking the justice or well-being of the whole community, with priority given to those most in need. We are called to challenge and transform widely accepted economic practices that undermine this well-being or common good.

In 2001 an LWF working paper, “Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion,” was widely distributed among member churches, as a first stage toward LWF work on this topic, in collaboration with other ecumenical and civil society partners. Much of what is set forth there is reflected in the following, which is intended to focus discussion and strengthen commitments to the next stages of this work.

Relationships of the communion as a basis for transforming economic globalization

Economic globalization develops its own momentum in ways that obscure the human decisions and actions that have constituted it, and through which unjust patterns and policies can be changed. How can this sense of moral agency be recovered?

One crucial way this begins to occur is by what we receive through the communion: we become organically interconnected with one another. What holds us together—despite what may be our significant economic differences—is the transforming, relational power of God’s Spirit, who forms us into a communion. The life and power of God are focused in the benefits we receive sacramentally which in turn are to serve or benefit others.

Therefore, those of us who are relatively well-off cannot ignore but must address economic (and other) practices which adversely affect those with whom we are deeply connected through this communion, and through them, the rest of the world. We cannot ignore the cries. Those of us who are adversely affected by policies and practices of economic globalization must speak out and expect others in the communion to act in solidarity with us. Joined together in Christ, we are moved to act together in ways consistent with who we are:

- God communicates to creation a power constituted in the Word of creation,¹² giving it a goal much different from the human-centered question to accumulate money or power as an end in itself.
- Self-sufficiency (viewing ourselves apart from others) is transformed into community with others.
- Ruthless competition is transformed into cooperation with others.
- Production that uses others is transformed into participation in the life of others.

A different kind of moral agency begins to emerge. Rather than an unquestioned reigning power—an “it”—economic globalization begins to have faces and voices with whom we are related, who call us to act responsibly, and who hold us accountable for the decisions we make and the actions we are able to take in our everyday economic lives. Thus, we are moved to act out of a sense of relatedness (or solidarity), responsibility and accountability to others. Our economic decisions and actions can no longer be considered as private or “my own business.”

This “globalization of solidarity” is a crucial antidote to a globalization imposed by impersonal market forces that set us against others. It is one that the church as a global communion, with its many interrelationships around the globe, is distinctively called and empowered to live out.

Negotiating our differences

Through the cross we begin to hear the cries and see the suffering inflicted by forces of economic globalization. We discern how people, communities and the rest of creation are affected. Through the communion, the relationships between ourselves and others begin to be changed. However, we still continue to embody real differences. Our differing economic self-interests and access to economic power do not simply disappear.

Thus, as a communion we are challenged to find ways of talking about the different ways in which we are affected

by policies and practices of economic globalization, and work together for the global common good. This can be quite difficult because of our significant differences in access to economic power, in our ability to articulate what we are experiencing, in our ideological perspectives and in what we perceive to be in our self-interest.

- Policies seen as supportive of one community (e.g., providing jobs) often are at the expense of jobs in another community, such as when a business relocates.
- Agricultural subsidies in northern Europe may be seen as necessary for the sake of preserving rural communities, but from an African perspective, such subsidies are often viewed as obstacles to their food products being fairly traded on the global market.
- Farmers on one side of the US-Canadian border often see themselves as set against those on the other side, due to significantly different agricultural policies of these two governments.
- Investing in “emerging” markets may appear to be a way of improving a country’s economic situation, but how can such investments truly benefit those most in need? What should be the relationship between investment and aid?
- Canceling, or significantly reducing, a country’s external debt may be crucial if it is to recover economically, but who will pay and how will the government be held accountable for how the unleashed funds are used? How can cycles of indebtedness be transformed?

Name some specific examples in which the self-interests of some are set against those of others. Why is it difficult to discuss these differences?

In considering such examples, we move into the difficult terrain of practical policy and decision making where interests often must be balanced and where there are no easy or “pure” solutions. As Lutherans, we realize that what is good or sinful, constructive or destructive in human history is intertwined in complicated ways. Amid these ambiguities, we must implement proximate policies that, insofar as possible, will further the well-being of the neighbor, especially of those who are the most vulnerable. For this negotiating to occur, there must be truth-telling and honest assessment that is not captive to ideologies that keep us from seeing, speaking about and redressing what is likely to occur.

Here, being a communion may not provide the solution, but it does set us in relationship with one another, based not on the convergence of our economic self-interests, but on the powerful bonding of God’s Spirit that can withstand honest discussion of our differences and probing for common ground. Rather than workers in other countries being seen as threats to “my job,” their lives are connected with mine through a *communio* reality that is more compelling than those forces that would set us against each other. The focus shifts to how together we can find and work for policies and practices that will serve our common rather than separate interests. There are other arenas besides the church in which this can also take place, but given who and whose we

Discuss an important, possibly contentious economic policy issue that is especially relevant for members of your group. Do so in light of what it means to be a communion. What policy recommendations emerge from your discussion?

Globalization limits the ability of people, governments and nations to insist on respect and negotiation of conditions when an outside company comes onto their land to use their natural resources, infrastructure and their workforce.

A response to the LWF working paper on globalization

are, churches are one distinctive setting where such deliberating or negotiating for more just, life-giving policies should especially occur, as part of their witness for the sake of the wider social and ecological good.

The role of governments

God is active in creation and history, including through economic and political institutions. Too often, however, these fall far short of the intention that human needs be met through them. This is why it is important that, wherever possible, Christians critique and hold such institutions more accountable. The government should guard against exclusions, injustice and exploitation of people and of the earth. As Luther also declared in his explanation of the Commandment, “Do not steal:”

It is the responsibility of the princes and magistrates to restrain open wantonness. They should be alert and courageous enough to establish and maintain order in all areas of trade and commerce in order that the poor may not be burdened and oppressed and in order that they themselves may not be responsible for other people’s sins.¹³

How do our different situations and interpretations affect the way in which we see the role of government? Are there common or complementary ways we as Lutherans around the world can view the role of government? How can we as churches be more effective in preparing members to participate as citizens in political life, and to engage in public policy advocacy, including on behalf of those in other parts of the communion?

On the basis of this and related theological understandings of governmental responsibility, strong traditions have been established especially in Europe regarding the responsibility of government to uphold and further the common good. Social market economies and strong regulatory policies are important examples of how this theological tradition has been influential. This is in stark contrast to many other areas of the world, where government is viewed as the enemy of the people and their interests, due largely to what they have experienced through repressive or negligent government policies and practices. Furthermore, under economic globalization, governments around the world are increasingly dominated by economic powers.

The challenge to a global Lutheran communion is to revisit these understandings in light of these very different perspectives and realities prevailing in the world, and especially in the face of the pervasive neo-liberal trends that are encouraged if not mandated under economic globalization. Increasingly, government regulations and responsibilities are being reduced in efforts to “get government out of the way” for the sake of the free reign of policies of economic globalization.

On Lutheran theological grounds, such developments can and should be viewed critically. The challenge is how to counter this, given the weak and often corrupt governments in many parts of the world, and the cynicism toward government and lack of democratic accountability in many countries. Yet, if economic globalization is to be transformed in ways that will more genuinely enhance and sustain the life of communities and of the earth, effective and accountable

governmental and intergovernmental policies are a crucial means through which this needs to occur.

Christians are called to engage in public policy advocacy efforts that seek to influence and change government policies, individually, through organized efforts of churches, or through international efforts. For example, the LWF has been:

- Participating in campaigns to cancel the external debts of severely indebted countries.
- Encouraging greater transparency and democratic participation in international financial institutions.
- Supporting the use of human rights instruments or treaties to counter the negative effects of economic globalization, and monitoring governments to fulfill their responsibilities.
- Advocating for fair, more just trade policies and practices within and among countries.
- Participating in the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, and its strategy focused on global trade policies.

Living out our baptismal vocation through economic life

As Christians, we are called to live out our baptismal vocation through arenas of responsibility in daily life. This might be as family members, workers, farmers, consumers, managers, investors, or other roles through which we participate in economic life. Such a Lutheran doctrine of vocation, when linked with what it means to be part of the communion, has important implications for the

How have you or your church been involved in advocacy efforts? Where should the LWF efforts focus? What policies should the LWF be advocating in relation to economic globalization?

transformation of economic globalization. Just think of the multitude of ways in which sixty million members of the Lutheran communion, for example, are involved in economic life and, under economic globalization, have access to decisions that affect people in much different parts of the world! How can we responsibly live out the implications of these relationships?

As members of this communion, through which we are “changed into one another,” we are implicated in a calling or task: to make economic decisions and take actions mindful of their effect on “the neighbors” with whom we are interconnected.

- How can these linkages be made through the multitude of relationships that churches already have with one another around the world? Through these relationships how can we work for changes that will bring positive economic changes in the lives of others?
- How could awareness of this become more a part of the church’s ongoing Christian education? How is your church preparing people to make responsible economic decisions for the sake of others?
- What has your church said or done about economic globalization? Have you been involved in addressing problems of debt, unfair trade rules and practices, or policies of financial institutions?
- How can members be more strongly encouraged and better

equipped to impact policies and practices of economic globalization, especially in relation to those who are adversely affected?

- How can this inform the investment practices of individuals, churches and related organizations? What corporate, socially responsible or ethical investment practices are you involved in? What should the LWF be doing in this area?
- How can those who suffer from practices of large companies, for example, call upon and expect members with direct access to those companies to call attention to how their policies and practices affect those in other lands? What would you do if a church in another part of the world called on you to act on its behalf?

- How are members in situations of economic privilege linked with those living in situations of deprivation? How might a deeper sense of vocation and communion shape the ethical decisions and actions of each?

In other words, what are some of the countless ways through which members of the Lutheran communion, through their daily life callings, can participate in the transformation of economic globalization, so that it might become:

- More just?
- More accountable to human beings, their communities and the rest of creation?
- More life-giving for the sake of the well-being of all?

What would be the impact on our everyday consumption patterns and on our local, national and international economic policies if we were to insist that the primary purposes of economic life is for the well-being of just and sustainable communities the world over, rather than to maximize wealth or increase the consumption of those who already have more than they need? How would our lives be different if economic life were to be transformed to serve the well-being of human beings and the rest of creation, rather than human beings and the rest of creation being sacrificed for economic ends? How might this transformation be “for the healing of the world”? What will we as a Lutheran communion and member churches commit ourselves to?

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, “The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics,” in Abdel Ross Wentz and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 352.

² *Ibid.*

³ These are defining trends as summarized in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing A Broken World: God and Globalization* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), chapter 1.

⁴ Sarah Anderson and John Cavanagh, *The Top 200* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 1996).

⁵ “When something has a price and is bought and sold, it becomes a commodity....One tendency in a capitalist society is for more aspects of life to be reduced to commodities over time.” Pamela Sparr, *United Methodist Study Guide on Global Economics: Seeking a Christian Ethics* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1993), p. 15.

⁶ Moe-Lobeda, *op. cit.* (note 3), chapter 1.

⁷ This treatise is composed of the “Long Sermon on Usury” (1520) published in 1524 together with a treatise on trade written in that year. See Martin Luther, “Trade and Usury,” in

Walther I. Brand and Helmut T. Lehman (eds.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962) pp. 231–309.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–250; p. 261. See also pp. 247–251 in which Luther argues that the “common rule” and merchants’ “chief maxim” [“I may sell my goods as dear as I can”] is wrong and against God’s commandment. This rule “opens every window and door to hell,” for it defies both the law of Christian love and natural law; it places my own profit over my neighbor’s need and well-being.

⁹ Luther, “Admonition to the Clergy that They Preach against Usury,” *WA 51*, p. 367.

¹⁰ Luther, “Trade and Usury,” *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 270.

¹¹ “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” in E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 58.

¹² Kyle A. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 201.

¹³ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 419.



J. Healing Creation



Human beings have spoiled or destroyed much of God's good creation. How can creation be restored, and our relationships with the rest of nature healed? How is this related to sacramental understandings? What can other traditions teach us? What are the power and the responsibility of human creativity in relation to the rest of nature, including the use of technologies? How far should efforts go to heal or improve human life? At what risks? What is at stake theologically?

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course...that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know it.

"Warning to Humanity," issued in 1992 by more than 1600 senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel Laureates in the sciences

In Rwanda, the decade of development project (1973–83) was launched by a dictatorial regime that frequently violated the earth. For example, officers from the army and relatives of the dictator began cutting down the natural forest of Gishwati to get rich quickly. In the forest lived people from the Impunyu tribe who were given the derogatory name of "pygmy" by the colonial invaders. The Impunyu, who were the poorest people of the land, lived in harmony with the creatures of the forest, working with the animals to sustain life. The forest was their common home. But, as the forest was cleared the Impunyu and the monkeys lost their source of food and began to move to another forest. The forest, they said, had been contaminated. One day, in sympathy, all the elephants left together in one mass exodus to a forest in a neighboring country. They seemed to know their home had been violated and they had become victims of "development." In solidarity with their forest community they went into exile and have never returned. (Eyewitness account by Gedeon Gakindi, teacher from Rwanda)

A living creation

The account from Rwanda is but one example of the many ways in which hu-

man beings, especially in the last century, have contaminated, violated and destroyed living places on the planet. In many human communities, similar unjust treatment of life can be found. What this story illustrates is that creation is not a passive object. Creatures and creation are alive. Earth and members of the earth community respond to human acts of injustice and injury against creation.

We find the same sense of a living, responding creation in the Bible. Every creature is summoned to worship God. Fields and valleys sing for joy (Ps 65:13). Wild animals and whales, winds and forests, are called to praise the name of Yahweh (Ps 148:7–10). When disaster strikes, the land mourns (Jer 12:11) and wild animals cry to God (Joel 1:20). In fact, all of creation groans because of the bondage it feels (Rom 8:21–22).

Here you will be invited to relate to creation in a new way—not as an inanimate resource we are free to use at will, but as a living thing. All living creatures are really relatives, a community of living things, our kin. We need and support each other. Ecologists tell us that in the earth's ecosystem all living things are interdependent. This is consistent with Scripture which depicts all the life God created as linked in a common bond with the earth. We are all children of the earth as well as creations of God (See the Bible study on Genesis 2).

If we view creation as alive, as a community of living beings that respond to what others (including humans) do, then we will view what happens to the earth in a less detached manner than we may have done previously. When we see the web of life as alive, it is quite appropri-

Are there aspects of your culture, or your upbringing, that help sensitize you to "hear the voices" of the earth community? Can you hear parts of earth crying in pain? What makes this difficult or uncomfortable? What kind of ecological disasters have happened in your community that have made you sensitive to the cries of creation?

ate to speak of the wounds suffered by the earth, the injustices experienced by members of the earth community, and the pain that humans have caused creation. Humans have not only committed crimes against creation, but also have caused sicknesses that have proven fatal to many species on the planet.

The response of the elephants in the opening story about the Impunyu tribe is remarkable. These members of the earth community found a positive solution to the crisis caused by one oppressive human group and expressed solidarity with their companions in the forest community. We can describe this action as a form of healing. They sought to survive the destruction of their habitat and to save their progeny.

In focusing on “healing creation,” we must ask: What are the wounds which have been inflicted on creation? What caused these wounds? How can we discover ways for the earth or members of the earth community to respond so as to effect healing and restoration? How can we assist in this healing process?

Before we explore ways in which we can assist the healing of creation, we need to understand and counter those attitudes and theologies which have led many in our churches and society to participate in crimes against creation. How has popular theology, especially in the West, helped contribute to the current ecological evils? What kinds of teachings have led to the serious wounding of the earth? We will consider three. With them as backdrop, we will then reflect on alternatives that might contribute to the responsible use of technologies, creation-keeping, earth-honoring discipleship and sustainable earth-human relations grounded in Scripture, Luther and ancient Christian faith claims.

“Heavenism”

In many churches, we sing hymns that focus our faith on a gleaming land above. This land is holy, pure and free from want or woe; it boasts a shining citadel with celestial choirs and a high holy God enthroned in glory. This land is heaven. By comparison, earth is considered a rather pathetic place—as “evil,” a place for pilgrims and strangers who “journey here below” on their way to that “golden shore.” And so we have sung: *“Guide me O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.”*

Through such imagery, and in sermons and teachings that reflect the same vision, the earth is devalued, viewed as material, this-worldly, inferior and corrupt. Earth is a “barren land,” the place where Satan reigns and tempts us. Heaven is portrayed as spiritual, otherworldly, superior and pure. It is where God dwells and waits for us. Earth is characterized by trials and tribulations; heaven is a domain of endless bliss. The negation or devaluing of earth to uphold the spiritual superiority of heaven has been designated as “heavenism.”

As Christians, we believe that through faith in Christ we will rise and enjoy eternal life. When, however, we equate eternal life with a place called heaven and portray it as far superior to earth, we have a problem. Earth then becomes less important in our lives; our ultimate goal is heaven. What happens to earth is relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things. An attitude of heavenism can lead churches to avoid the crisis facing earth. Why worry about earth when our real home is in heaven? Why spend our time healing the wounds of earth when this domain is considered

Does your church tend to avoid dealing with the wounds and suffering of earth? Does it have a “heavenism” tendency in its theology and worship? What other factors are involved?

inferior, material and “barren”? Why try to understand the suffering of earth, when we believe that life in this earthly realm is characterized by suffering?

Dominion theology

The tradition of “dominion theology” also has influenced Christians to avoid facing the pains and injustices experienced by the earth. This tradition is based on the familiar “mandate to dominate” found in Genesis 1:26–28. According to this theology, we are commissioned to rule, to dominate and to subdue the rest of creation. Over the course of time, in many parts of the Christian church, this text has been taken out of context, isolated as the *locus classicus* (the normative text) for how humans should relate to creation. After the Enlightenment, philosophers and other thinkers assumed that human beings were superior to nature. That superiority rested especially on the mind or reason, something which the rest of nature did not possess. Some even identified human reason as equivalent to the image of God.

How has the concept of dominion over creation been expressed in your community? What kind of injustices to earth tend to be perpetuated as a result of this dominion theology? Is it possible to keep the language of “being stewards” or “having dominion” and still treat earth justly?

One result of this theology was an assumed dualism, a fixed gulf that separated humans from nature. According to the French philosopher René Descartes (CE 1596–1650), humans are the “lords and masters of nature” who are expected to dominate and control the forces of nature with their reason.”¹ Francis Bacon (CE 1561–1626), his contemporary, goes so far as to say that in order to gain rational knowledge, humans need to “torture nature.”² This ten-

dency can be traced back to classical thinkers like Cicero (106–43 BCE) who writes “we are the absolute masters of what the earth produces.”³ In popular language this was translated into expressions like “harnessing nature” and “mastery over nature.”

Dominion theology and its attendant worldviews tend to devalue earth as a domain God created expressly for humans to use and exploit as they gained increased mastery over the mysteries of nature. Injustices to earth are easily viewed as a necessary part of the progress of humans, the superior rational beings of creation. Even those who speak of humans as being “stewards,” tend to do so on the basis of the idea that humans are representatives of God over creation rather than as servants of creation.

Redemption reductionism

A third factor that has led many Christians to ignore the plight of creation, is the tendency to reduce the scope of God redemption and reconciliation to human beings. We have rightly emphasized that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ so that all who believe in him might have life and salvation. In Lutheran circles, we have emphasized that salvation—or justification—is for humans by grace through faith alone (for a different interpretation see the chapter here on “God’s Healing Gift of Justification”). This emphasis has meant paying relatively little attention to the fate of the rest of creation. If salvation is by faith, it hardly applies to animals or plants. If salvation requires faith in Christ, then it would seem that mountains and rivers are not part of the plan of salvation. But is that true? Does redemption involve more than mortals? Have we reduced redemption to the spiritual and ignored the material, the whole of creation?

Christian teachings on the fulfillment of all things at the end of time has

tended to focus on the deliverance of humans. We even speak of the end of the world, and of earth being destroyed by fire. We tend to think of earth as disposable; it eventually will disappear and be replaced by a new spiritual realm. Many hymns reflect a similar theme: “That day of wrath, that dreadful day, when heav’n and earth shall pass away.” Where heaven is simply the physical expanse of the sky, that part of creation that will “shrivel like a parched scroll.” For hymns and preachers with this orientation, we are living in the last hours before this physical universe comes to an end. It is corrupt, disposable, under judgement. Its condition is terminal.

Given this orientation, why bother preserving and healing the planet? Such actions will, at best, merely defer the inevitable. If earth is disposable, why expect it to be redeemed? Why bother to heal it? A few nuclear blasts, holes in the ozone layer or devastating droughts can all be viewed as portends of the earth’s final annihilation.

How have you heard these tendencies expressed? How does your church view the scope of redemption? Is it limited to humans? Or is there also a sense of a mission to heal creation? Is there a belief that earth, after all, will disappear so that trying to restore it is a waste of time?

Technology and the healing of human life

Instead of having a “mandate to dominate” the world, our human role is to be “God’s creating, restoring, sustaining ‘hands’ on this earth.” Metaphors matter. The first model of human vocation privileges men, glorifies independence and elevates the status of humanity to a position over the rest of God’s creation. The

second model of human vocation is gender neutral, acknowledges interdependence and stresses that God cares for the rest of creation through human beings’ faithful service. It makes a difference whether we see ourselves as “masters of the universe” or as “God’s loving hands.”

These metaphors influence human creativity and guide our use of the technologies we produce. It is not hard to see how a “master of the universe” mentality has wreaked havoc on earth through gender inequality, ecological degradation and the horrors of war. Guided by this mindset, the technologies we have developed have arguably produced more harm than good.

In the face of this history and the power of human arrogance, many are concerned about the dangers posed by new developments in molecular biology and biotechnology. For example, various means of gene therapy present us with the ability to identify and treat a growing number of genetic disorders. At the same time, stem cell research has great therapeutic potential to prolong and enhance the quality of human life. The “third wave” of research in agricultural biotechnology is aimed at improving the nutritional level of basic crops as well as the development of inexpensive foods that would provide protection from various diseases that plague the lives of the poor and malnourished.

There are many ethical issues related to the development of this knowledge and its related technologies.

- One set of issues revolves around the use of embryonic cells in stem cell research. For some, this is an unacceptable assault on the sanctity of human life, while for others stem cell research offers a means to improve the quality and dignity of human life.
- Another set of issues revolves around our ability to anticipate

the consequences of genetic intervention. Sometimes our technological abilities outpace our ecological sensibilities. Similarly, we experience a tension between a need to respect the virtue of prudence (and thus be cautious), while honoring the virtue of courage (and thus take some risks for the sake of improving health).

- Yet another set of issues revolves around the norm of justice. It matters who controls these technologies and who benefits from them. At this point, there is little reason to believe that this new scientific understanding and technology will benefit those who are poor as much as those who are wealthy. Just as we probed the secret of the atom and misused that knowledge in the last century, the stakes are even higher at the dawn of this new millennium as we manipulate the very process of life itself.

How should we as a communion of churches be responding to these ethical issues? How might human ingenuity be directed to more noble and just ends? How might we use such technologies to heal creation rather than to harm it? How can molecular biology and biotechnology be seen as means by which God is working through human ingenuity to care for and redeem creation?

The Lutheran understanding of sin reminds us to expect that human beings will be inclined to use all technologies to help themselves and to harm their neighbors. In many respects our tradition advises us to hope for the best in people but encourages us to anticipate also the worst. Is it possible to combine this hard-eyed view of human nature with our calling to serve as “God’s loving hands” in creation? How can we shape moral character and devise regulation to control the

use of biotechnology so that it can contribute to the “healing of creation?”

Lutheran perspectives for healing creation

Within the Lutheran tradition, Christians are called to reflect on and revise theological understandings that have obscured or betrayed the good news of God’s boundless love for this good creation. What resources can we bring to the task of challenging and reforming theologies that have justified human degradation of non-human creation? How can we counter the attitudes about creation reflected in popular theologies? How can we more faithfully understand God’s relationship to creation and human beings’ role in it? As Luther confronted damaging beliefs of his time, how might we do the same in ours?

These questions invite us to bring Scripture and our theological heritage to bear on one of the most perilous crises that humankind has faced—the possibility that our species is destroying the earth’s capacity to regenerate life as we know and love it. For a tradition that takes Scripture seriously, one key will be an insistence that all of Scripture, not just a few texts, be considered in probing the relationship of humanity to the earth. We consider first the relationship between God and creation, and then humankind’s role in creation.

God and creation

We need to challenge the popular belief that God’s primary reason for creating the earth was to provide humans with a home and a resource. Rather, earth exists as something good, in and of itself. In the first chapter of Genesis, before God created humans, God discovered that the world was good and declared it so. God



took Job on a journey through the various realms of the cosmos and challenged him to grasp the wonders of creation operating quite independently of human interests and beyond human ken. Earth exists as a mystery, in and of itself.

Furthermore, earth is a sanctuary where God has chosen to dwell. Some biblical texts seem to suggest that God dwells somewhere in the sky. However, many texts stress that God is not detached from the earth but present in earth, indwelling it.

Consider the words of the seraphim who appeared to Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). This song proclaims that the visible presence of God “fills” all the earth. In other words, earth is God’s dwelling place. God is present in all creation, not just in some place in the sky. (For more on the “face” and the “glory” of God in creation, see the Bible study on Ps 104)

Christian traditions throughout the ages are rich with the claim that God dwells not only with, but also within earth’s creatures and elements. While often obscured by “dominion theology” and “heavenism,” this claim has not been silenced. Luther insists that God is present not only in human beings but in all created things:

Nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.⁴ God exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things.⁵ ... everything is full of Christ through and through⁶ all creatures are ... permeable and present to [Christ].⁷ Christ ... fills all things Christ is around us and in us in all places....he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there⁸ ... the power of God ... must be essen-

tially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf.⁹ God is ‘present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being’¹⁰ God ‘is in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all....’¹¹

While in Luther the scope of redemption and of the moral universe unfortunately is limited to the human, the scope of God’s blessed creaturehood—in whom God dwells—and of revelation, is cosmic.¹²

If we speak of earth as God’s home and as part of Christ’s body, with a “voice” of praise and proclamation, how should we view the acts of pollution and devastation we have committed on the earth, God’s “sanctuary?” What are the implications of Luther’s claim that God is “in, with and under” creation? Where in your community or country is creation suffering and groaning? Can you, in faith, discern Christ suffering there?

If indeed the earth *bears* Christ, then it bears the crucified and living Savior. Just as the theology of the cross teaches that Christ suffers with human beings who suffer, so too Christ suffers with the groaning creation where it has been abused, wounded and violated. Just as Christ is crucified when human beings are brutalized, so too Christ is crucified in the brutalized earth. Christ is not detached from creation’s suffering, but rather is “in with and under” it. In Luther’s words, “the finite bears the infinite.”

Scripture pushes us yet further. God, it seems, has called upon creation not only to be God’s own dwelling place and body of Christ, but also actively to praise and proclaim the one true God! “The heavens are telling the glory of

God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). (See also Rom 1:20; Ps. 148:7–10)

Just as Luther’s sacramental, incarnational sense of creation calls us to counter the idea that earth is disposable and hence not worth redeeming, so too does Scripture. A close study of Paul’s letters reveals that God becomes incarnate to effect reconciliation (healing relations) not only with humans and between humans, but also with the entire cosmos, in all its physical and spiritual dimensions.

... that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

Consider also the implications of the first chapter of Colossians. The special value of creation—all things in heaven and earth—is that the entire cosmos bears the stamp of Christ. Christ is intimately linked with creation by being named the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15–16). Through Christ, who is God dwelling in the very matter of creation, God reconciles to God’s self “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:19–20). All creation is reconciled to God; relations between God and creation have been healed through Christ. In God’s eyes, creation is worth redeeming. “According to biblical faith, God’s cosmic plan of restoration includes the whole creation, not just individual souls.”¹³

The redemption of creation by Christ suggests that in God’s plan creation is no more disposable than humans are. As the Bible studies on Revelation suggest, the future vision of creation is not its elimination, but its transformation, restoration and total healing. In this transformed creation, the heavenly resides in the midst of earth, the spiritual “in, with and under” the material.

What are the implications for you of the claim that God holds earth in such high esteem that Christ came to redeem all creation? If God has been reconciled to creation through Christ, how should we be working towards a healing of relations between humans and creation?

Humans and creation

Given the nature of creation as God's dwelling place, the role of creation in revealing and praising God, the work of Christ reconciling all things in creation, and the character of creation as a living reality, what is the role of humans in creation? Who are we in relationship to the rest of creation? Clearly, the idea that humans are the rulers of creation who can treat it as a mere resource—like a team of servants at humans' bidding—is no longer acceptable. The high value that God places on creation and the cosmic significance of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have an ethical corollary: humankind is to relate to creation in terms of its relationship with God's love as manifest in Jesus Christ.

In recent decades, scientists have discovered a truth long known to mystics: in the marvelous and mysterious web of creation, every piece has its part to play and is dependent on other parts of creation. Humans are part of life's ecosystem, not outside or above it. More startling, we are a dependent species; by nature, we depend on countless other species for our survival. The earth and its life-forms could survive well (and better) without us, but not we without them. The web of creation is a living community, a family, a household (*oikos*).

All things living and all things not living are products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history, and hence interrelated....we are distant cousins to the stars and near relations to the oceans, plants and all other living creatures on our planet.¹⁴

There is a deep, aboriginal kinship, since all is stardust. All the "createds" are "relateds." *We all are kin.*¹⁵

The Bible is rich with kinship imagery.

Psalm 104 treats humans (verse 23) as one of the many kinds of living creatures for whom God provides. It depicts the earth as a shared home for the many kinds of living creatures....¹⁶

Creation worships God (Ps 148). "In this context, our place is beside our fellow creatures as fellow worshipers."¹⁷ Within this kinship, one species alone has the knowledge and power both for massive destruction and massive restoration, and the choice of which path to follow. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19).

Especially since the mid-twentieth century, the role of our species in earth's ecosystem has been destructive. While human life depends on the health of the earth's life-systems, "every natural system on the planet is disintegrating"¹⁸ and we are the cause of it.

How might humans honor other parts of creation, rather than dominating, devaluing, or exploiting them? Consider first who we are in the web of life, then the role we currently play in it and finally the roles we could play.

[T]he relationship of the human world to the rest of earth changed fundamentally and dramatically from the onset of the twentieth century to its close. Techno-economic power sufficient to destroy the material conditions of human and other life is the hallmark of that change, together with the explosion of both human numbers and consumption.¹⁹

Luther's understanding of sin, applied to us as a species, can help here. Luther understands sin as *se incurvatus in se* (self turned in upon self), the human proclivity to do everything for the promotion of self, out of concern for self, and using resources claimed as one's own rather than as gifts of God.

What should be our role in creation? Since its battle against various forms of gnosticism, orthodox Christianity has claimed that we are players in a cosmic

story from creation to final judgement....a moral drama....the history of everything....culminating in the calling to account of every creature for what they have done in God's world.²⁰

If our part in that story is not to destroy and exploit, then what is our role? As beloved creatures of God and as Christ's body on this good earth, we are to be God's creating, restoring, sustaining "hands" on this earth. In Luther's words: We are God's "hands." In fact, according to Luther, God "wants" us to work with God:

[God] is able to help everyone....God does not want to do it alone (but) wants us to work with God...wants to work *with us and through us*.²¹

Creation is an interdependent web of being in which the human species is largely dependent. In light of this scientific understanding and the theological recognition that God calls upon non-human as well as human elements of creation to do God's work, we realize that humans do not play this role alone. Humans, hairy wombats and rain forest vines are all alive, all are related and all have voices. These voices may not be human voices,

What to you is strange about this way of viewing the place and responsibility of humans in relationship to the rest of creation? Are there ways in which this is compatible with perspectives in your culture? Share traditional stories or customs that illustrate this, especially from the perspectives of women and/or indigenous cultures. How is earth's bounty understood? How do you relate to the trees, birds or rivers? How could you see that relationships shift to reflect the kinship of all creation as praising and serving God?

but they are the voices of our kin. As humans we are called to respect our relatives and love our other-than-human neighbors as ourselves. We are called to honor them as those who also praise God (Ps 148), witness to God (Deut 30:19), proclaim and reveal God (Ps 19:1).

Healing creation

How can we as human beings help in the healing of creation? What are the steps we need to take to help heal the wounds that humans have inflicted on the earth? How can we work with and learn from the other-than-human creation?

In light of the preceding discussion, consider taking the following steps:

- Acknowledge and confess the ways in which we humans have treated earth unjustly and wounded creation. Such an acknowledgment involves both identifying specific wrongs—local and global—that we have committed against creation and making communal confession in worship.
- Become sensitive to the groaning of creation: cries for help, laments over wounds, voices of hope and songs of healing. This involves relating to earth and the earth community as living realities rather than passive resources. It also involves discerning how Christ suffers with a suffering creation.
- Recognize processes of healing already at work in creation. By living as kin with earth's beings, rather than rulers of earth, we begin to ask how we can serve creation and assist in the healing process. The

Bible study on Psalm 104 describes how God is already at work restoring and healing creation. Our task is to see where healing is already taking place, and how we may play our role as co-healers with creation and with Christ.

- Participate in the “healing of creation” through community action. This may involve forming or joining an environmental action group that is relevant to your location. Reflect on how you relate to creation through your group so that such actions become an extension of your faith and worship, not just another chore. Consider community action on the levels of household, locality, nation and global community. Consider varied forms of action: lifestyle changes, public policy work, witness through protest, ecological education, restoration projects, “green” technologies and more.

What would you add to the above suggestions? What are you doing in your church and community? What are the particular challenges you face in your culture or society? What risks are entailed in seeking the “healing of creation”? How might these and other theological understandings help empower you?

Environmental guidelines

Furthermore, give attention to the “Environmental Guidelines” that have been developed in 1997 for program implementation through the LWF Department for World Service. How might some of these guidelines be applied to or adapted in your situation? What should be the role of the churches, and the LWF, in promoting and developing these and other such guidelines?

Imagine what it would mean for the worldwide Lutheran communion to make and seriously follow through on the commitment to seek the healing of creation as an integral aspect of our lives and faith. What might we do, as a communion of churches and in partnership with others? What initiatives should be taken by the LWF and the member churches, beginning with this Assembly?

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